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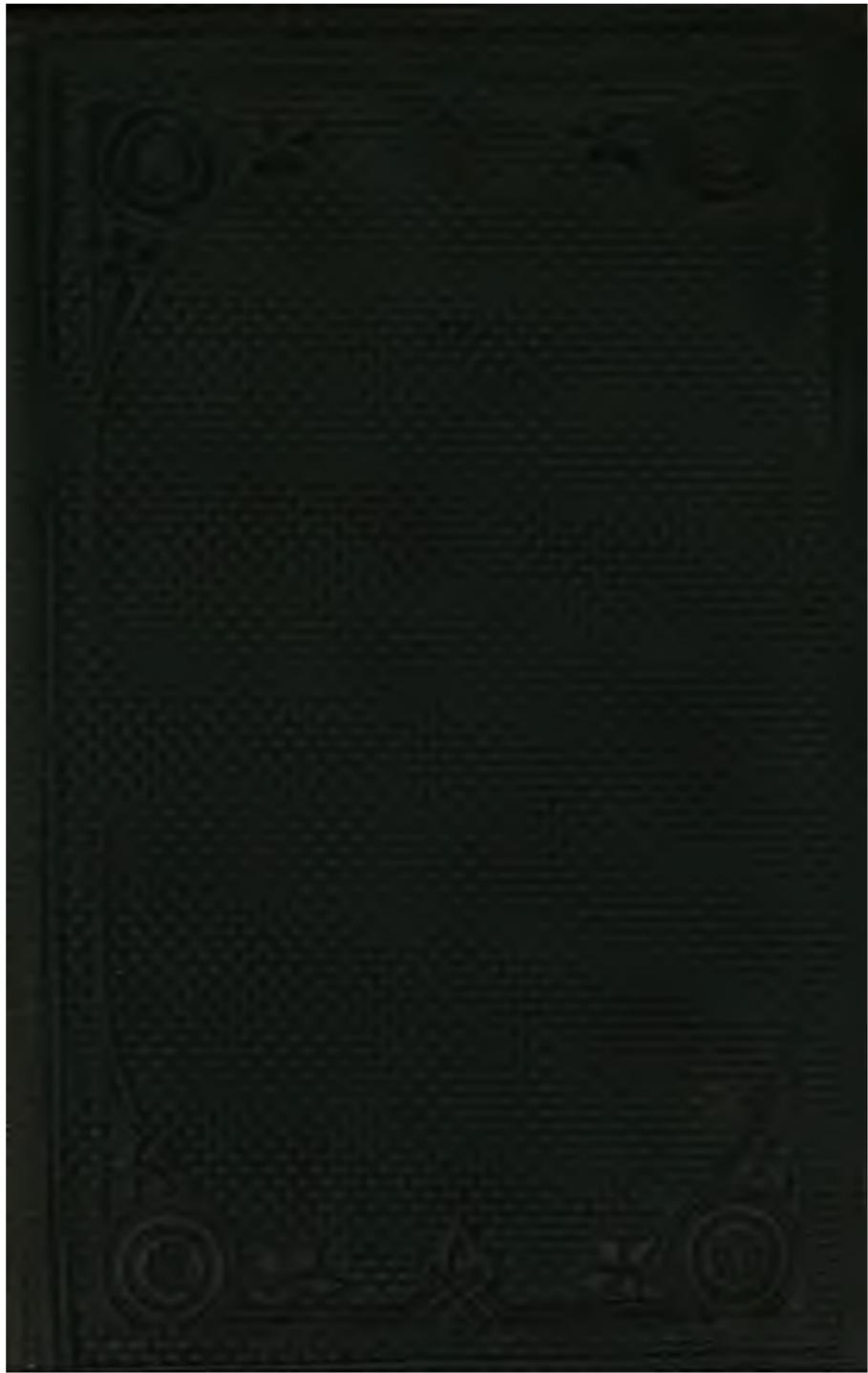
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HOME TRIALS.

HOME TRIALS.

BY MRS. VIDAL,

AUTHOR OF "TALES FOR THE BUSH," "CABRAMATTA AND WOODLEIGH FARM," "ESTHER MERLE AND OTHER TALES," ETC.

"At morn we look, and nought is there;
Sad dawn of cheerless day;
Who then from pining and despair
The sickening heart can stay?

"There is a stay—and we are strong
Our Master is at hand—"

LONDON:
JOSEPH MASTERS, ALDERSGATE STREET,
AND NEW BOND STREET.

MDCCLVIII.

249. u. 214.

**"No rest, no hope—yoked in thy gentle mood
To stern annoyances of petty strife,
Which weary the worn spirit out of life.
Yet let it be ; for it must be for good,
Or it would be not."**



HOME TRIALS.

CHAPTER I.

THE streets looked very dismal after a day's rain one evening in November. It was quite pleasant to see the nimble lamplighter coming nearer and nearer, leaving traces of his steps as one by one the gas lights peeped out. But the lamps, though an improvement in the prospect, only showed the pools and the mud the plainer. There were but few passengers at any time ; and on such an uncomfortable evening as this, scarcely one. Here and there an errand boy might be seen, sending his voice far before him, as he not untunefully sang some popular air, or a servant girl with her old-fashioned pattens and apron turned over her head, rushed wildly out to fasten up the shutters.

This street of which we speak, was, if one may say so, the "West End," or aristocratic street in the market town of Heathercombe. It had a curious name too, about which an old legend ran. "Potacre" Street had but two shops in its whole length at this period, but it was honoured by the vicarage standing at one end, beside two or three other substantial, even stately dwellings, with posts and chains before the windows. Opposite these houses stood their respective stables and coach-houses and gardens, while at the back you might believe yourself far from a town, so completely was the eye carried from the large gardens to fields, and thence to a wide sloping common which led to the river.

Besides these "bettermost" houses, there were a few modest but snug dwellings.

In one of these, stands a maiden lady, peering out anxiously yet idly over her neat white muslin blind. She bids the maid once again "sweep up the hearth and be sure that all is ready," and returns with an odd kind of frown to look up the street and down the street, and observes that the rain has ceased.

There is not much to see, but Miss Patty Lee likes watching; and besides it is too early to light the candles. Moreover, she knows that

Mr. Carlton the Vicar, went out in the middle of the day, and to the best of her belief, he has not passed since. He evidently had a bad cold yesterday in Church, and "if he had a grain of prudence he would not be out so late on such a damp, raw evening." But it has long been decided that Mr. Carlton has no prudence at all; hardly common sense, (Miss Lee thinks,) although he is so "uncommonly clever!" Just as Miss Lee's thoughts arrived at this point, who should pass the other side of the way, but the very man? His umbrella in a sad condition; but in his absence of mind he actually holds it, dripping as it is, under his arm! Miss Lee can hardly refrain from rapping at the window to remind him. He is talking very eagerly to some one—Miss Lee can't make out who, though she wishes she could do so, for the unknown is inside and in the shadow. Just then, a very brisk firm step passes close to Miss Lee, and a merry clear whistle is heard, a sound that has something social and cheery in it on this dismal evening. The cheerful blaze from Miss Lee's parlour fire acts like a magnet, and people cannot help looking in. The whistler looks in at the fire and on the round table where the china tea-set stands, glittering and dancing in the fire

glow. The old-fashioned high-backed chairs, the sleeping cat, the very flowers on the carpet look charming and tempting too, perhaps by force of contrast, though there is enough of neatness and comfort in the little low ceiled room to attract attention on its own intrinsic merits.

It is a young face, that which looks in so almost wistfully,—young and comely, and as with an involuntary shiver, he passes his keen observing eyes from the room and the fire, to the lady in the window; he touches his hat, with a certain air of gallantry, and ceases that martial air to which his footsteps keep such true time. And Miss Lee's frown vanishes with a pleased yet reproachful smile, and she touches the tips of her mittenèd fingers, and shakes both hand and head at him. In another moment she is rushing wildly towards the door, but checks the impulse, murmuring, "No—it won't do—best not. Betsy may not like it; folks are so ill-natured and envious about him. But how well looking the boy is to be sure!" And then turning from her post of observation, Patty Lee sinks into a chair, and for five minutes falls into a reverie.

A sharp rat-a-tat-tat rouses her. The par-

lour door opens, the little stout rosy maid ushers in a lady, then rushes out and puts up her shutters—runs back again, regardless of breath and dignity, and soon appears with a bright copper kettle and very rosy cheeks, while Miss Lee daintily measures out her best Souchong from an exquisite old graven tea shovel into the quaintest and most venerable of silver teapots, “making believe” to scold her guest all the time.

“It is a chilly wet evening, Patty,” said her friend, drawing in close to the fire.

“Yes, come, warm your feet, Betsy, and then the tea will be drawn. I began to give you up,” (with a sigh.)

“Did you? As if any weather would keep me away on this day—your birthday—of which I wish you many more happy returns.”

This was spoken in a hearty, comfortable, low, soft voice that would go straight to the heart. She was plump as a well-stuffed pin-cushion, “neat and tight.” Once she had flaxen hair, but now it was silver. Once her blue eyes had been praised and toasted, and what is more, loved, and even now they were tender and dewy with the kindly grace of a loving good woman’s heart.

A greater contrast than these two friends, friends since they were sixteen, could not be imagined. Patty Lee, angular, brown, stiff, yet impulsive, jerking out her words with a sharp stab in each ; though often her friends discovered the undertone of a deep strong heart, amid all the harshness. She was the sole remaining child of an old but decayed family, whose forefathers for many generations lay buried in the parish churchyard. Her father had been a general medical practitioner, scouring all the country round in his daily visits,—loved and respected. He worked hard, but thanks to a frugal wife, his hoard increased. He died, leaving six children. Only one, Patty, remained. She had been “reared,” as she said, in a “prudent, thrifty manner;” now she found her yearly income more than with her quiet notions she knew how to spend. She had no near relations. The only kinsman she had, was one she was rather ashamed to own as such—one John Bracy, who lived about five doors from her, and of whom, more anon. Betsy Stafford, her life-long friend, like herself a spinster, and of independent, though rather narrow means, had not even one kinsman, “no one related or connected to her,” as she sometimes said, a little

sadly, "in the whole wide world;" but nevertheless, she was "Aunt Betsy," or "Cousin Betsy," to a tribe of all ages, and her gentle face lighted up pleasantly, as she remarked, "I never need spend a lonely evening; people are so very kind; there are so many welcomes awaiting me."

"Well, I am rather chilly," Miss Stafford allowed, as at last she drew her seat from the blaze to the table, and helped herself to Miss Lee's muffins. "You see it was school day, and I got my feet wet rather; and then old Ben is so ill, and the Vicar so overworked; and just as I was going home, I met poor Grace, looking so miserable, I could not help turning back with her."

"I wonder when Grace will ever look otherwise than miserable," returned Patty with a little dry toss of her head. "In my days, girls were content to work hard at home, and were not so very thin-skinned! Now, speak a word of reproof or even advice, and one gets tears! Tears! I am sick of it; from mother to the youngest; while he, who ought to be the support and master. Ah! pshaw! . . ."

"That's the rub; that's the misfortune, Patty," returned her friend, with an eye brim

full of pity and kindly excuse for her neighbour's fault. "When—excuse me, you know, but really Mr. Bracy is very singular and rather trying—when the head is not as one might say, quite . . . quite fit for head, all will go wrong. Such a clever man too—one who might take so respectable, even a high place here, as the Vicar remarked. I fear me, Patty, the young ones have a hard lot there. I grieve to see both Grace and her mother look more and more cast down. Even the beauty Judith, even she, smiles in a way no young girl does, who has a happy, contented heart."

Patty Lee heaved a long deep sigh. "It is all humbug," she said. "Every family has its trials, its 'skeleton' as one may say. Were you and I, Betsy, born on a bed of rose leaves? Ah, no! But the spirit to endure, the feeling of obedience is departed, gone quite out of the land, Betsy. I hate to hear all the complaints all the pity bestowed on those girls. If their father is a bit queer, and has a temper,—and—and, in fact, if he does make them know that this world is a place of trouble, what of it? Best know it early. Bend the young twig the way the wind will go, and it won't come to breaking afterwards. As to John Bracy, I don't stand

up for him ; as I told him to his face, I think him a great rascal and an evil-disposed nature. But I have no patience with his family neither ; no, not a bit of it ! ”

There was a pause, and Betsy looked doubtfully at the fire. Presently she remarked,

“ The Vicar is interested in Grace, I think ; and how kind he is, to be sure ! He ought to make haste and marry.”

“ It isn’t proper as it is,” Miss Patty said, shortly.

“ I don’t know. You see the income is very small, and there is so much to be done here,—so many poor. He says if he was married, his money and his time would be less at his disposal. He is so very good. Yet I confess I do like a married Clergyman ; and I think a Clergyman’s wife may do a great deal of good. Besides, it certainly makes it pleasanter for some persons. But Mr. Carlton is above all gossip. He is so true, so sincere, so devoted.”

“ He is a good man, I don’t doubt. But I hate such nonsense, such palaver, such romantic nonsense : it will come to no good, mark my words ! setting girls to work and think so much of themselves ! Better keep them tight at home, darning or cooking.”

"I fear we can't reckon long on our Vicar," Betsy went on, pursuing her own thoughts. "Every one remarks how very ill he looks; and his maid says his cough is bad to hear all night long."

There was now a little break, caused by sending away the tea-things; after which the two friends drew near the fire, both with a piece of knitting.

"I wonder who that could be who was walking with the Vicar just now," observed Patty.

"Most likely it was Mr. Bracy. I saw them pass my window together; and I know he—that is, Mr. Bracy—was looking for Mr. Carlton some time."

"Queer," said Patty, with a little dry clearing of the throat. Then the knitting-pins worked very fast indeed. "Shouldn't wonder if it was about Grace. Bracy is half wild about it; and I know there was a scene the other day: he scolding and storming, and Grace crying; and the mother fainted in the middle."

"Does he object to her working in the parish?"

"Yes; and he is partly right there too. But still he is hard to please; and it is shocking to hear his language."

"Very shocking. Poor Mrs. Bracy looks very frail and poorly, and—"

"Always piping and droning," put in Patty, impatiently. "Enough to stir a warm man's blood. Such a lackadaisical, poor body, I never saw. I don't think the girls take after her, except, perhaps, that little Lyddy, who is always on the fret. I know, if Judith was my child, I'd use a rod, or lock her up! She is bold enough for a dozen; and Grace, though she is quieter, has a strong, if not an obstinate will of her own. Pooh! I've no patience with people's setting up to be saints, not I!"

"But you like people to try their best to emulate saints, I am sure," said Betsy, in a pleading tone. "But I agree with you," she added, in a deprecating way; "I don't like any assumption of superiority, any implying, 'I am better than others.'"

"Are you thinking of—How does that affair about Harry Vane go on?" Betsy said, presently, looking up a little timidly as she spoke.

Patty gave the fire a trimming poke or two, as if she was willing to expend some of her feelings on it, before she trusted to her voice.

"Go on? It don't go on at all. He is not 'pious,' not 'devout' enough for her! Poor

lad ! of course it can end but one way. If he takes to bad courses, I know on whose head it ought to fall ; and I hope it will too."

"I always wonder at her courage," Betsy said. "Do you know, Patty, I can't help feeling respect for the resolution. He is so very winning, so handsome ; most girls would take him. But he may be steadier ; he is very young. There is hope yet."

"There is none ! I know the spirit of that family !" and Patty paused, and checked a sigh. "They are proud : he is proud. Rejected now, he won't stoop to clear himself, or play the repentant hypocrite—not he ! But if she had loved him, as she ought to do, if she is flesh and blood, such a warm, loving heart as he has would have gradually come round. He would have made a good man. As it is—"

"And you don't think it dangerous to take that for granted, even without any time for proof ? Ah, Patty ! all the affection and love—what is it, without something else ? With the example of her father before her, and her own really deep principles, do you know, I can't wonder, indeed I can't. Depend on it, it is a hard trial to her. Her very looks show how she feels it."

"The more the better—a little, set up, prim humbug!"

"No, no, Patty, you are wrong. Your love for the lad prejudices you: it does indeed. I am loth to say it, but indeed, indeed, I know more than one very bad thing of him. That last report was but too true. I saw myself—" and here she lowered her voice to a whisper.

Patty heard with a darkened brow, and very grave she looked; but she only said, sharply,

"Nonsense, Betsy! You ought to be above such gossip! Besides, men will be men. It is a bad place for a young fellow here, so watched as he is. If you only saw him come in here as he does, so pleasant, so boyish—ah! I didn't think it of *you*, Betsy. But that Vicar and all these new-fangled notions, daily services and the like, has turned you, I see. You are severe; but if all the world has a stone to cast on my boy, I'll stand up for him, that I will! Poor Harry! poor lad!"

"Wouldn't it be good for him to get that appointment they spoke of? He is clever: idleness does so much harm at his age," suggested Betsy.

"O yes! exile him at once! send him off, no matter where, among the blacks and wretches;

and let him sin and do as he likes, and as others do; only we shan't know it: and then he'll return here with a fat purse, and be a worthy, respected man! Transport him at once to Botany Bay! If he is as bad as you make out, he can't be far from deserving it, I am sure!"

"Don't be angry, Patty. Hark! what's that?"

"If you please, ma'am, shall I let any one in?" inquired the maid.

"It can only be one—Harry Vane," answered Miss Patty, resentfully. "No, Anne, tell him I'm engaged.—Of course you won't care to have such a—such a—"

But Miss Betsy's earnest remonstrance and Patty's feigned anger were useless. A loud rapping with knuckles, and a whistle of a merry tune, made Anne turn with a broad smile of welcome, saying, "Oh, it is only Master Harry!" and knowing him to be a favoured as well as constant guest, she opened the front door.

"Why, Anne, where have you been? Flirting at the back door, I'll wager. Woman! are you aware that it rains?"

"Miss Stafford's with the missis, sir," pleaded Anne.

"Indeed! I thought she'd be all alone, and 'wery melancholy ;' so I came to enliven her, d'ye see? There, don't say I've brought any mud to your carpets," he added, after a vigorous shoe-rubbing, and passing his fingers through a thick mass of curly and bright chestnut hair, with another smile and a little twinkle in his eye at Anne, which sent her back to her kitchen fully convinced that a pleasanter, handsomer young man never existed than her mistress's godson, and deciding that all the strange stories circulating in the town about his doings were the fruits of envy and ill-nature.

"I hope I don't intrude," the new comer said with a bow, pausing on the threshold, and looking on the cosy little picture, of the two old ladies, the cat, and the well-kept room. "I fear I disturb important consultations. I believed to find my respected godmother alone. Good evening, ma'am," he added, as Betsy drew a chair, and signed for him to come near.

Patty, meanwhile, did not find it easy to recover herself. Her feelings were warm, and her features somewhat stiff. Harry, knowing her countenance well, guessed that something was wrong. He put his hand—such a strong hand

—on her thin arm, and with a winning sweetness, hard to resist, said,

“Come, now, what is it? See! my shoes ain’t dirty! I was a good boy, and wiped them.”

“How cold you are, Harry!” Patty answered.

“Well, I shall soon get warm here. Ah, Aunt Betsy, if you wish to insure your life, and your habits were known, no office would receive you. I saw you pattering about, on such a day as this has been.”

“Weather never frightens me.”

“Umph! no. The Parson, too, is proof, it seems, and the whole tribe of ‘district visitors,’ or whatever they’re called. I’ve a great mind to study physic, now. If things go on at this rate, a doctor will have a good berth here in a few years. But, I say, what treason have you been plotting? Don’t deny it: I saw by your faces when I came in. Why, Aunt Patty looks guilty now even.”

“Nonsense, silly boy! You had better not ask about what doesn’t concern you.”

“How do I know it doesn’t? Why, now, I’ll bet you half a pound of Souchong against a dozen of cigars that it does concern me.”

"Nonsense. Are you of so very much importance, do you suppose?"

"Seems I am. Do you mean, that I don't form the staple for almost all the fire-side tea-table talk in the place? I'm not by nature inclined to vanity; but if people will drag me into a public character, why, what can a poor fellow do?" And he stroked his whiskers, and put on an affected and conceited look.

"You ought to be ashamed of it, instead of joking! Why will you provoke people to talk by your madcap ways? What did you do only last Sunday? For shame, Harry!" said Miss Patty.

"Spare me! That unlucky, confounded runaway brute of a horse has brought me enough into mischief. I have heard of nothing else. I am sick of it."

"Why don't you leave it off, then? Harry, Harry, what are you coming to?" said Patty, finding it hard to keep her face grave, as she caught his roguish and defiant look.

"I wish I knew myself: coming to—to-misery, perhaps! Who knows?" And a shadow crossed his face, painful to see.

Miss Betsy shook her head, but said nothing. Miss Patty gave a jerk in her seat, and dropped some stitches, while she said,

"O fie, O fie!"

For a little time silence fell on them all : Harry biting his lips, his hands in his pockets, and his feet on the fender. What he saw in the red-hot coals is not known ; no pleasant shape, certainly. But it was not his nature to remain long in this mood ; and he soon began stroking the cat the wrong way, in spite of Miss Betsy's mild remonstrances.

"I won't have my cat worried, Harry!" said Miss Patty. "I can't think what ails the boy to-night," she added, pettishly ; for she was provoked at his saying or doing anything which could possibly make any one else think him wrong. She was angry at his "letting out" in this way before her friend. "It was so perverse," she thought, "at any other time when I am alone he is so good and proper ; even reading to me, if my eyes are weak."

As he continued to worry poor puss, Miss Betsy tried to coax the animal to her sheltering care, murmuring, "Poor creature ! she doesn't like it," and so on.

"Don't you see, Miss Stafford, some folks are perverse by nature. Now, when I find persons shocked, and so on, I invariably go a great deal further than I should, were I left alone."

" You needn't boast of it, Harry," remarked Patty.

" Some horses are easier led than driven," he remarked.

" Sing us a song, do, Harry!" said Miss Patty.

" Ay, do, now; I love a song," said Betsy.

" What shall it be? I suppose nothing but a hymn will go down? A ballad is profane, eh, Aunt Patty?"

" Sing the one about The Admiral," she answered, shaking her head reprovingly too.

And after a little more talk, he gave that pathetic—for so it is, if properly sung—and pretty song; his mellow, flexible voice being as good as his ear was correct and true. One song followed another till they were surprised to find it supper time.

Harry's spirits were now in full flow, and he kept both ladies laughing and merry, till Miss Betsy insisted on going. Then he would see her home, guiding her so gently and ably through the rough and dirty pavement, that her kind heart was quite won; and she was more inclined that night to agree with her friend Patty, that perhaps returned love might prove a better guide than anything else for this wayward boy.

But poor Harry Vane was one of those beings who, with every loveable quality, have no self-control. Easily led, soon tempted, he had never learned to say, "No." After leaving Miss Stafford at her home, as he turned to go to his house, he met one who might be called his bane. A few artful and judicious words upset poor Harry's previous resolutions ; and when at last, after a wild night, he timidly knocked at his father's door, a window opened, and a few stern words informed him that "he might sleep where he could ; he had forfeited all right to a home there."

"Moreover," his father added, as Harry turned away, "understand this : I don't wish to see you again. I wash my hands of you from this hour. Do you hear?"

"Yes, I hear. Good-bye, then." The last words were spoken in a forced and indifferent manner.

The window was closed, the light soon put out, and Harry passed away, never again to cross the threshold as his home.

CHAPTER II.

THE Mr. Bracy mentioned in the last chapter, lived only a few doors from Miss Lee, and, as it has been said, he was a distant relation of hers. His father had been a man of moderate but independent fortune, and himself had been educated at first for a doctor; but, with every chance of a good prospect before him, he suddenly threw it up, got into dire disgrace while "walking the hospitals" in Edinburgh through his violent temper, and after some interval spent in no improving way, he submitted to take the place of a clerk in a bank at a neighbouring town, where his uncle had a considerable share. Here, too, he failed through dislike of punctuality and restraint, though his abilities gained him a good reputation. There was another idle time, during which he fell in love with a pretty though somewhat weak girl, daughter to a well-to-do retired tradesman in the same town as the bank was.

Her father would not hear of marriage till the young man had a trade and could maintain a wife. This induced him to try a shop; and his

father was at last induced to buy him in as junior partner to the old-established house of Pearce and Co., henceforth to be Pearce and Bracy. For a time all went well. Bracy could be agreeable when he chose, and pleased the customers as well as his partner, going regularly to spend his Sunday with his sweetheart.

Still her father delayed consent, wishing to prove Bracy's steadiness. But the lover's force of character prevailed, and he persuaded Lydia Banks that marriage would be quite as good, if brought about by Mr. Johns the Presbyterian Minister, as in the old parish church by the Rector. So one day, they managed to avoid scrutiny, and arrived that Sunday evening at Heathercombe, taking possession of a small house he had rented, as man and wife. All went well for a time; and old Banks seeing his son-in-law remained constant to his shop, and that his daughter expressed becoming contrition, but assured her father that Bracy was an excellent husband, he came round, and made them a present of £1000.

This put the young couple into good spirits. The business was flourishing, and Bracy's father required nothing as repayment, merely saying, he considered that to be his son's share of his

fortune, and should in consequence leave him no more in his will. In after years, when the sky was stormy, poor Lydia Bracy used to think, if she had but waited and been married in the church, it would have turned out better. She was a well meaning woman, but ill taught, and with but little moral courage or energy ; so that when troubles came, with a young family, and through her husband's temper, added to his volatile mind, which never rested long in one line, she sank at once, and in a dolorous tone of voice was fond of warning young people to "get married in the church, for the meeting houses were not the same thing at all." Poor Mrs. Bracy did not know, and had never been taught in what they failed or differed ; but she knew she was wrong to deceive her father : and it is always the case, that we may trace much trial and trouble from one false step. If we only know little, but act up to that little, it will lead us on in knowledge and light ; but if we are faithless, even to the teaching of our own hearts, we get darker and darker. So true it is, that obedience is at the root of holiness.

Bracy had abilities which under better guidance might have done himself and others good ;

as it was, they became a snare. One theory and scheme after another arose, and not one was worked out with perseverance, but given up at the first difficulty, and something new took its place. He soon got tired of his monotonous duties in the grocery shop, and thought his talents might be better used than in weighing out sugar and coffee, or keeping correct accounts; so, gradually, he deserted the shop and trusted it to a foreman, while he worried his wife by turning the house upside down in his experiments. Now, he had discovered an entirely new use for steam. Now, a new way of painting wood, warranted to last for ever. Every month some fresh plan for making a fortune, was considered infallible, while his business was neglected. One success had the bad effect of so raising his hopes, that he insisted on cutting the shop altogether, thereby offending Mr. Pearce and losing a considerable sum of money. After a weary time of difficulty, disappointment, and excitement, which very nearly brought his wife to her death-bed, and injured his never very good temper, he made enough money by an invention in machinery, to justify him in his own eyes in removing to a much better house, in which he claimed all the attics for his own

work-rooms, and soon destroyed the nice garden in building a furnace and other things, which no one saw the use of but himself.

His wife found none of her remonstrances any use, so she left off advising, and unfortunately took to fretting and grumbling. This, with her natural want of energy and bad management, and the children's disorder, soon drove Bracy away from his home. He was never there, except shut up in his work-room ; and as his wild projects failed and money became scarcer and scarcer, his temper became so violent, that his wife grew to dread his appearance, and the children hid away from him.

At last, when actual poverty knocked at the door, and debts were increasing, he moodily consented to try another way of business, and set up as a "glove cutter," rather proud of proving how soon he could learn a trade. Heathercombe was a great place for the manufacture of gloves. Many hundreds of women gained a livelihood there and in the adjoining villages, by sewing gloves : while the men called glove-cutters drove a thriving trade, and others were employed in "grounding," or preparing the skins for the peculiar glove called at one time "beaver."

Though Bracy did not like steady work, neither did he like poverty ; and having had a pretty sharp taste of what that was, he now with tolerable good will kept so many hours a day regularly to his new work. He was lucky, and for some years their income had been good. Money fell to him also, from unexpected sources ; some from a brother who died in America, and again a maiden aunt left him all her savings. Bracy grew fond of money. He gave up his old pursuits, to a great extent ; but his wife had no cause to rejoice. His leisure hours were not better spent ; and many an unseemly and sad scene took place when he returned home of a night, his temper ruffled by both play and drink. It was also a matter of difficulty for Mrs. Bracy to get money to pay for the children's schooling, while for any work of charity she had to refuse, or appropriate money wanted for other purposes.

At the time of our story, they still occupied the large house in Potacre Street, with an extensive garden, never in a tidy state. Every market day, quite a crowd might be seen round the back door, of persons bringing back gloves or fetching more. He had the character of being a hard master, but that did not lessen his

custom. His eldest son was now in the business. There were three grown up,—John, Judith, and Grace; then came a lad called Robert, in his teens; and then four younger girls. Four lay buried: "A long family," as poor Mrs. Bracy was wont to sigh out. "Poor Mrs. Bracy!" No one ever mentioned her name without this epithet. It was difficult to imagine she could ever have been young or pretty. "It was difficult," as Harry Vane once said, "to imagine the sun ever to shine on her." She was like some wretched plant, reared in a cellar unhealthily, colourless, though not actually white. Her eyes had always unshed tears; her hair, dry and frizzly, of a dull whity-brown, now plentifully streaked with grey, always stood on end, with little bits of thread, or dust, or straw, adhering to it. She grew thinner and thinner, till her clothes looked as if a touch would bring all down. Her feet swelled, so she always went down at heels. Her eyes were weak, wherefore, she was always deficient in buttons and strings, and her fingers liked to have a peep at the world through the gloves. Her voice was the most pitiful sound you can conceive,—something like, only not so musical as, the piping of the wind through a narrow

crevice, dying away in a wail. She had so long been ailing and ill, that people ceased to realise it, and now, when disease was really at work, it was put down as "fancy," or Mrs. Bracy's "nerves."

What could the children be, under these circumstances? Their childhood was a perpetual succession of illnesses. They always had severe colds, and were always meeting with accidents. One of them was burnt to death, and those yet alive all bore marks of hair-breadth escape from some danger. They were sworn at and scolded by their father, and whined over by their mother. They were always "naughty," so that they came to believe it a word of no especial signification. They passed through a rather rough life, and three of them were remarked now as fine and well-grown. Judith was more. She was a beauty: a handsome, self-willed, haughty girl, who rebelled against the domestic discomfort, and had purpose and energy enough to carry through several reforms, as far as regarded her own particular comfort and taste. She insisted on opening and bringing into daily use a good-sized sitting room, from which she excluded the "children" and which with her own hands she kept in order. Her drawings—for she had con-

siderable talent—hung on the walls. There was a second-hand piano-forte: for Bracy both loved music and understood it, and bought an instrument as soon as his girls could learn. By it stood a violin-case and a flute,—father and sons both occasionally playing.

Mr. Bracy had his vanity, as well as pride. He was proud of his name, and of tracing it back to landed proprietors in the county. He liked to usher a guest into a well-furnished room, and did not grudge buying a new carpet and sofa, when Judith returned from school with notions somewhat raised.

John, the eldest, was sullen and reserved. He disliked being a glove-cutter, and never quite forgave his father for insisting on it. He was called handsome, and was so, as far as regularity of feature goes.

Grace was not a beauty, but was very nice-looking. She would have been quite pretty, if she had looked happier. But from her birth she had been singularly grave and quiet. She was sensitive and rather timid, inheriting some of her father's speculative and imaginative qualities, without his brilliant, showy talents: for Bracy had a wonderful power—a quick and ready comprehension, with a decided gift for speech. No

one could better entertain a party ; no one made a better speech. But for a temper ever prone to take offence and not ready to forgive, he would have been a very popular man. As it was, the world did not fully know what his temper was. He kept his sunny side for strangers, and his storms for home. Grace feared him, and early learnt to cling to her mother. As she grew old enough to understand things, she felt all her mother's wrongs deeply and soon tried to help her.

With anything like good teaching or example, Grace would have been invaluable in that family. As it was, her mother called her her only and best comfort ; and it was Grace who turned a willing and sympathising ear to her mother's sufferings, and Grace who tried to keep the younger ones in anything like order. But though she tried hard, she did not succeed in establishing any order in the household, and her timidity and lack of hopefulness, caused her to give it up in despair. But she never understood how her sister Judith could go out and enjoy society, or whatever pleasure offered, apparently forgetting home troubles. In Grace's ear, there was ever the echo of a sigh and dismal intonation, or her mother's weary eyes seemed to fol-

low her in sad reproach ; or, worse still, she shuddered at the remembrance of loud, angry words, and violent gestures. Grace preferred remaining at home. Her greatest treat was listening to music, when on rare occasions a family concert was held. She did not play much herself, though she could sing, and when required, take her part correctly in a glee.

Her best loved of the set was the fourth child, Robert,—yet he was a source of keen anxiety, too : for he had a taste for getting into mischief, and thereby offending his father, with whom he was no favourite. Judith was generally most in favour. Her beauty and showy attainments pleased him ; and though they sometimes argued and battled, in a way terrible to Grace, on the whole Judith got on the best with her father. Through his love for music, she could generally “manage” him, and get him to acquiesce in her wish for society. She knew his weak points, too, and could work on them for her own ends. But with all this selfishness, Judith was the favourite of the family,—of all, save the mother.

The young people were in a somewhat awkward or undefined position with respect to their footing in the town. Mr. Bracy, being descended

from an old family, and from his own abilities, had made a place for himself. It was his own fault, if he did not take part among the more respectable inhabitants. Here he felt his wife to be a drag ; and it had been one cause of bitterness between them. His cousin, Miss Lee, visited every one ; and through her, Judith contrived to get a footing where she would hardly otherwise have had one. It was her ambition to be received as one of the "young ladies" of Heathercombe ; and a great triumph it was when, after a hard battle at home, she managed to gain the victory, and attend the Yeomanry Cavalry Ball, and her hand was sought eagerly by the very best partners. She spent much time in contriving to get invited by the one or two families supposed to take the lead in the society. She had not yet succeeded, but lived in hopes. Though only a county town, it was at this period, some twenty years since, well stocked with inhabitants of independent means, —such people as now would be found living at fashionable watering-places, or abroad.

There were many excellent houses, and all were filled. Strange to say, this place was divided into parties or circles. A few individuals, more social than fastidious, mixed equally in

both, but otherwise they were divided into two sets, and very often two wholly distinct parties would go on during the same evening. It did not appear to lead to any bitterness or ill-will. Precedence was naturally accorded to a few old families, and neither the doctor's nor attorney's wife and daughters thought of taking offence, but enjoyed their own tea parties quite as much. During the winter, regular assemblies were held ; and to these any one bearing a respectable character was admitted. Some of the county people also attended, and, as Miss Lee observed, "there was room enough for all, if people behaved well and knew their places."

Now though the glove-cutting was profitable, it was scarcely what Judith's ambition desired. She wished to go to the balls, as her "father's daughter," and not as "Miss Lee's pretty cousin," she said.

This observation struck an answering chord in the father's heart ; and one evening, being otherwise chafed, after hearing his wife utter a pitiful request for Judith not to be so ambitious or upsetting them, just as things were comfortable, he swore that he was tired of the trade. With his powers, he could certainly do something better than cut out gloves, or even lend

his name to the concern ; for as to the actual work, he had long ceased to touch it. Judith was right. He had as good a right to be an esquire as any man there. He should either take a farm or set up a bank. John might keep up the present concern : as to Robert—he was to be articled to Mr. Shaw at once.

At which threat Mrs. Bracy burst into tears, and had to go to bed, pouring out her fears and troubles to faithful Grace, at this new notion, which would and must end in total ruin.

Within the last year a good deal of stir had been made in the town, by the death of the old Vicar and induction of a new man. The former clergyman had been a pleasant, gentlemanly person, with a handsome fortune of his own. He was therefore able to give liberally, and was liked by the poor. He was thought proud, and his wife still prouder. No one was more determined in keeping her visiting list select than she had been ; and though once in the course of two years or so, she made it a point to accept an invitation at one or two houses in the second set, it was quite understood to be a condescension on her part, and received as an honour. She did it from motives of duty, she said, as the Vicar's wife. But gradually old dis-

tinctions and old feelings were giving way to new.

The present Vicar was young, and a man of the day ; somewhat levelling perhaps, and utterly ignoring all distinction of caste, visiting both sets indiscriminately, and amused by such petty distinctions. He had no private fortune, and the living was a poor one. So he did not think of marrying, and strove to make up by earnest and hard work for his smaller alms. People had not quite made up their minds about him. The old plentiful gifts and handsome subscriptions were missed ; and although Mr. Carlton brought new comfort to many a hitherto unvisited sick-bed or poor erring soul, not considered "respectable," I am sorry to say many persons thought he lost dignity by going so very much about the poor.

The silken robes, the silken hose, and careful turn out of the old Vicar, and his wife's stately appearance, and their footman and carriage-and-pair, was something to be proud of. It carried weight. The Lord Bishop himself dined at the vicarage then ! Thither came the noblest and richest in the land ! Now, only a school girl was promoted to open the Vicar's door. There was no carriage, not even a horse, and no dinner

parties ! The extent of Mr. Carlton's hospitality was asking a few clerical friends to dinner and a yearly school feast, with occasional tea drinking among those who helped him in his parish, in which he tried to enrol both old, and young, and middle-aged ladies ; and stranger still,—men ! All this was new and strange. People doubted and feared.

But the Vicar went quietly on his own way. He was a man of good judgment, and knew what he was about. He had a great stock of patience, and could afford to wait, he said, till he had proved himself no dangerous person, only a hard working and poor clergyman. He had the gift of preaching, too, which went far to cover his supposed defects. In this one respect, even the staunchest supporter of the good old way could not avoid confessing an improvement ; for, truth to say, the late Vicar had grown sadly dry and prosy in his old age, and never had been particularly famous for his sermons at any time.

At first, attracted by the novelty, the old church was much filled ; many hitherto attending at the dissenting chapels, merely because they liked a good preacher, came back to the old seats in the old church. Yet, before many

months had passed, there was evidently a great movement and stir among the Dissenters. Perhaps they found it was time for them to be awake and at work ; the easy-going time having passed away, and this Vicar working somewhat in their own way, by his systematic visiting and being always at hand to exhort and to advise. It was also whispered here and there that he was a great reformer, and no good could come of so many new-fangled ways, and so much of services, teaching and education. When the fifth of November came round, Mr. Carlton, though he gave his pence towards a bonfire on the common, ventured to hint he thought it high time to cease burning Guy Fawkes, and questioned the ragged urchin, " who it was thus annually burnt ?" Then people looked grave, and feared Mr. Carlton was scarcely orthodox, and soon a dreaded, dreadful word was whispered over tea-tables, and threats were uttered of leaving the Church, which coming to the ears of the dissenting ministers, they naturally made the most of, and even preached about it on the following Sunday.

Mr. Bracy's house being nearly opposite to the Vicarage, tended towards his making an early acquaintance with them. He won Mrs.

Bracy's heart very soon, by his kind sympathising manner and visiting her during one of her now frequent attacks of suffering. He thought her very ill indeed, and it was new to this poor woman to hear her pain allowed by any one. He listened patiently to her long and tearful history, and strongly advised change of air and plenty of fresh air every day. He took pains to draw Grace out of her retiring shyness, and prevailed at last so far, as to get her to teach in the Sunday school. He lent her books too, and gave her hints as to the management of roses, which he said if he could afford the time and the money, he should indulge himself in ; with Judith he made way through the medium of music. But she was almost offended at his proposition for her to help in the choir in Church. Judith considered that a step beneath her, who even refrained from lending her magnificent voice, as one of the congregation. She had some undefined notion that it was "vulgar" to sing in Church, or to join in the responses, and had often reprimanded Grace for doing so. She at last succeeded in silencing her sister by calling it "affectation," a word which often prevailed to frighten Grace, when other arguments failed.

At first Mr. Bracy seemed to like the new

Vicar, and had even gone to Church of a morning to hear the sermon, which he praised afterwards for its point, clear argument, and choice of language. But ere long, Mr. Carlton offended him in some way, and he withdrew altogether from Church in consequence, and grumbled at Judith for consenting to take part in a music meeting Mr. Carlton wished to get up in the town. Mrs. Bracy after this was ill at ease and timid as to Mr. Carlton's visits to her, and much to Grace's dislike, made many contrivances to keep it from the father's knowledge. In one or two public matters, it happened that Mr. Carlton and Mr. Bracy differed, and although Mr. Carlton had judged it advisable to be very cautious, and had refrained from commenting on Bracy's habits of life, Bracy had a misgiving about it, and was himself conscious that it was such as the Vicar could not approve. This served to keep him at a distance. Every evening he brought home some new anecdote of the Parson's "red hot" ways, or some bit of gossip as to his sayings and doings. He even went so far once, as to declare, he should forbid any member of his family from attending a Church where such doctrine was preached; but as no one breathed a word of remonstrance or even sur-

prise, this threat died away, and had not been renewed.

They even began to fancy that Mr. Bracy did not observe, or if he observed, did not dislike, the increasing intercourse between his family and the Vicar. But they were mistaken. One of Mr. Bracy's peculiarities was his aptitude for taking strong dislikes, almost antipathies. Sad to say, he had done so with regard to his own child Grace. It would almost seem as if he lost all self-control with regard to her. Her presence in the room was a jar; the sound of her voice a positive annoyance. If he did not speak it, his looks expressed but too clearly his dislike, and often made the poor girl shrink and tremble, though it was only lately she had suspected the truth. She had, of course, always known she was no favourite, and meekly resigned any such distinction to her sister. She never expected notice or kindness. She knew her father's temper to be touchy and even violent, but it was long before she saw how invariably it burst upon her head. And now suspecting it more and more, she kept it to herself. She would not add one drop to her mother's overflowing cup of trouble, and hoped she had not observed it.

The mother on the other hand, prayed earnestly that her child might never see it in its terrible truth and strength. She had thought of trying to get Grace away from home, as a teacher or governess,—anywhere to be happy; but it was so hard to lose this only comfort, and Grace was so fond of home too, and so very shy. Nor had she been to school like Judith, and though she had good sense and refined taste, her mother judged her as inferior to Judith, and doubted her being quite capable of acting as governess. As her illness increased, and she knew her days were numbered, the poor mother looked with painful fear on this child's future.

It occupied her much, but every plan failed, till she even desired, if it could be, that her own sorely tried and suffering life might be prolonged, in order to be near Grace. At one time, brighter hopes began to spring up. She found that in spite of Judith's monopoly of all the notice and admiration, there was one who appreciated her dear shy Grace. How the mother loved him! How she watched the rise and progress of this attachment, and what good hopes she built on it for Grace's future happiness! Now this was all gone. It was a sad

story, and the misery of it had considerably increased Mrs. Bracy's complaint. But having so far described the position of the Bracy family, with regard to their home circle, and with respect to their neighbours, it is time to close this chapter, and let events and people speak for themselves.

CHAPTER III.

"ONE word, Grace! I entreat you to hear me, to give me a few moments! Grace!"

Grace Bracy had taken her two younger sisters for a walk, partly to please them, and partly to leave the house quiet for the sick mother. She looked herself pale and weary. As she passed through a narrow lane, shadowed by a line of tall Scotch firs which grew out of the hedge, she was conscious that footsteps were somewhere near, and she turned to see; but no one was behind. A low spoken "Grace!" however, made her look up, and Harry Vane stood looking over the hedge, leaning against a fir-tree. He had been there long watching her,

waiting to see if haply she might look that way. She had chosen this lane for shelter from the cold wind, and it amused the children to gather up some of the fir cones.

But although she well knew the field belonged to Mr. Vane, and had before now met Harry there, waiting to join her in a walk, on this day her eyes were not once lifted in that direction. Slowly she paced up and down; but when he spoke, a bright crimson spread over her face, and she trembled. She said "Good morning," and passed on. Then came that entreaty,—and it was followed up by a desperate scrambling jump from the field into the lane. His hand was on her shoulder, and he bent down, determined to meet her eye. She shook her head, but could not speak a word: as he prolonged his reproachful but searching gaze, tears rose and stood in her eyes.

"You are sorry, then! Come—let us have a talk. There is no one to watch, with their dreadful malice and slander," and he tried to draw her hand on to his arm, but she resisted:

"No, Harry, don't!"

"I suppose I am not good enough! Do you think I shall pollute you if you take my arm?" he said, bitterly.

"I thought you were gone away!" she presently said.

"Where? Did you really think that, Grace? Should I go without trying to see you?"

"I hoped so, after what has happened. Where is the good of it?"

"You hoped so! and what has happened? If you mean my governor shutting me out because I was rather late, you know well enough it must have come to that sooner or later. I can't—no one could—stand such crabbed tyranny. You needn't be shocked, Grace. I speak out what on my soul I believe you think in your own heart,—at least I hope you do. Yes, I hope you are sensible that your father is not kind: it would argue a want of proper spirit of self-respect otherwise. Well, you can conceal your thoughts,—I can't; out they must come. The fact is, my home is not particularly pleasant to me, and every one knows yours is not to you. Your mother has owned as much to me, and even begged me to be kind to you,—yes, to make her poor Grace happier than she had been. True, I assure you; I don't say I am one of your pious sort: far from it. But I do say, I like you to be so. You know I do! You might make what you will of me. Let us get away

out of this miserable place, where the very eyes and tongues drive me to mischief. Let us marry, Grace, and go to the colonies. You'll see how I can work. Trust me, and I'll not deceive you. You know I have something of my own. It would be the nest-egg of a fortune. How happy we should be, Grace! Haven't I always loved you? And once—once—you didn't dislike me, either. Not so very long ago, you would not have turned down your mouth, and walked so scornfully and coldly by my side. But—"

"I am not scornful or cold. O, you know I am not! You shouldn't say such untrue things," Grace cried out, while tears streamed down. "I don't pretend," she went on, carried away by pressure of long-repressed strong feeling, "I don't, as you and Judith say, 'pretend' to anything. If I do try over and over again to be good, and fail over and over again, it is hard to be called a hypocrite and pretender! I don't mean to set myself up! I! who feel myself so low—so vile—so weak!"

"Come, come, that is regular Methodist talk! I beg your pardon, I don't mean anything when I say 'pretend.' I know it is your self-control, and because you are good, that you don't break out as I do, and as Judith does. Why, I

shouldn't like you if you did so ! Be gentle and quiet as you like, my darling, only don't cast me off!"

" But I must!" Grace leant against the hedge, and faced him. " Harry,—once for all, never again,—let me beg you to turn over a new leaf—to be—"

" Steady?" he put in, " d'ye hear ! don't I say I will ? When once you are my wife, I shan't be so tempted."

" That won't do. Harry, if I love you ever so much, it would be downright sin in me to be your wife, unless I knew you were different ; sorry for the past, and really desirous to do better. Your wife ! What influence has a wife ? No, no ; do it for the sake of God, and because it is right. Think no more of me ; I can't—I dare not think of you."

" You mean to blot out my very existence, then ? By Heaven ! I can begin to fancy what drives people to put an end to themselves ! Driven out—blotted out ! Is this your Christian's creed ? Why, the very heathens are kinder !"

He turned half away, with so gloomy and stern a look, that it alarmed Grace. She noted then more fully, that since she last saw him, three

days ago, he was altered. He looked ill, haggard, less cared for in dress. There was something different altogether. Surely he had felt his father's anger, though people were talking of his shameless indifference and reckless want of proper affection.

"Oh, Harry!" she exclaimed, "what are you going to do? God help you and me too! What will become of us?" And the usually composed and restrained girl now clasped her hands with vehement gesture; then bowing down her head, she pressed her side, as if a sudden pain had seized her.

He walked on a step, looking on the ground. Then he suddenly turned.

"Grace, will you or will you not? Oh, Grace!" he added in a softened tone, again coming close, and taking both her hands; "you can't, you haven't the heart—you mustn't give me up. You dare not!" he went on, consulting her face and reading her agony. "Consider what it is to drive a fellow to despair! to leave him without one soul to care for him in all the world! One, too, so weak, so easily tempted to wrong! Why, nothing can save me! I shall go headlong to ruin; the sooner, the more complete, the better, too. If I can't be good, can't be

loved by the good, I may as well get all the pleasure I can out of this life. Grace! Grace! believe me; I have pictured to myself such a happy home! I will be kind to you; I will love you always. Don't give me up, Grace!"

She tried to speak, but no words came. Her pale lips quivered, and her whole frame shook. He stooped and kissed her forehead, and then her lips, in the tenderest way.

" You are cold and shivering," he said; " let us move on. Yes, you must, you shall, this once, if never again!" And he forcibly and firmly retained her hand, and drew it on to his arm.

" Run on, Jenny and Lydia, there are good girls; I want to talk to Grace," he said to the children, as they came up, having finished their race.

" Race with us, Harry," said one.

" Give me a ride on your shoulder," begged the other.

Harry was prime favourite with all children and animals too, though he did tease Miss Lee's cat sometimes.

" I can't, now; I must talk to Grace," he said. " But go on, and then, perhaps, some day I'll tell you a real secret;" and laughing and pleased, they ran on, though casting a backward

look to find out what Grace could be crying for, and what made Harry look so "funny."

"I must not wait long. It is time to return," Grace said, little above a whisper.

"You shall go, directly you have said three words. Say, 'I will marry you, Harry,' which is five, but no matter. You see, Grace, things have reached a point now. I am not sorry. Really, I don't mean to be wrong in saying so. I am sorry I vexed the old man so. But I can't waste any more words, even if he would believe them. Deeds, not words. Heaven knows if Hell is really paved with resolutions broken; I have had my share in the work! But I don't mean to do so again. I've been thinking, and I believe my best way will be to go first to some large town and pick up a little knowledge there, which will give you time, you understand, to make ready. Then your friend, the Vicar, will marry us. We are both of age, or rather you will be in a month, so we can dispense with consent, you see. Then, Grace, we take our passage to Canada or Australia, whichever you prefer. This time twelvemonth we shall be regular Darby and Joan,—as happy as possible. Do you see?—do you hear, Grace?"

"Yes, I hear."

"And you agree? You must say it is a good plan."

"Yes, very good for you. Follow it, Harry. God grant you success and keep you from—evil. But—I can't be your wife."

"You must. Grace, don't try me, don't torment me. I can't say more, can I?"

"No. Say no more. It adds to the pain. I can say no more, either."

"Grace! Grace! do you wish to send me straight to perdition."

"Harry, I will not listen to such dreadful words!"

"And what are the words to the fact—the reality? Consider it. You, who read your Bible, ought to know what is said of that place, where sinners, such as I am or shall be, will go,—at least if priests say truly! Do you wish to help me to go there: for that must be your intention by speaking so. I tell you, it rests with you, whether I am saved or lost!"

"God forgive him!" she exclaimed in horror. "Harry, let me go. Is this a way to induce me to bind myself to you? You show me by each word how entirely you are without love or even fear of the Almighty God, and yet you expect me to promise to be your wife. Didn't I warn

you long, long ago? Didn't mother tell you what would happen? Didn't you promise to give up such company, to work and be steady, and haven't you quite lately done . . ? O, Harry, I hardly know what you have done. I only know it is something so very bad that even men are afraid to speak out before me. The whole town talks of you. You defy opinion; you wilfully obtrude your sins, where others at least hide them, and you don't even seem sorry. I should sin too, if I promised to love and obey you; I should sin against God. We are told to hate sin, to abhor evil, and hard, hard as it is, I must learn to—not to love you any more till you repent. O, Harry!"

"'Twill be no very difficult task," he said angrily. "Thank you, at all events, for plain speaking; you have some spirit, after all, Grace. Yes, take away your arm. I beg your pardon for taking it, and more so still, for daring to kiss you. So they can't even 'speak' of my sin. Do they know what it is? Blind fools; sneering, white-washed humbugs! Condemning a fellow first—never even hearing him speak. I could tell you; but no—it is not for your ears. I am bad enough it is true, but not all you imagine perhaps, Grace. Well,

well, let it be. Give a dog a bad name, &c. I shall soon be clear of it all. Aunt Patty will think of the prodigal, the dreadful sinner yet; at least, if they don't succeed in convincing her at last. When she gives me up, it is all over with me. Well, good morning; we shall scarcely meet again;—may you be happy. Perhaps in my shanty in Canada forests, I shall see in a stray newspaper your marriage. You are coming out I see, breaking your shell. Should not wonder if the Rev. Saintly Vicar himself thought you'd be a good she-curate! Good notion that—accounts for your bitterness."

"You will be sorry one day. Good-bye!" she said in a low tremulous voice, which in spite of the evil spirit within him, caused his heart to jump.

"Sorry?" he cried out in a loud shrill tone. "Sorry! why should I be sorry! No, glad, rejoicing. I mean to cast care and sorrow to the wind. Henceforth I'm up to any thing; a free and independent citizen of the world; no ties bind me. The world lies before me. Hurrah, hurrah!"

And he wildly threw up his cap in the air. His curls were caught by the wind; his eyes shone; she thought he had lost his senses; she trembled

so that she could scarcely drag on her feet ; she yearned even then to throw herself on his neck, and promise to love him ; she did love him, better than anything else in the world. But from early childhood, Grace had been religiously impressed, and lately vague feelings of awe and searching for truth had taken shape and form, and reduced itself to practice. Her progress had been slow and unmarked by others, but it was sure. She had long feared Harry's want of principle, but tried to believe her mother's charitable version, and to look for improvement. Startling reports had lately been about ; terrible accusations, and now these were, as it seemed, confirmed by his father's turning him out. An only boy ; the apple of the stern old man's eye too.

Grace had to act for herself. Her father had stormed, and swore he would not consent to receive such a "blackguard as his son-in-law;" but the mother could not believe it was so bad, and Judith laughed her sister's scruples to scorn ; while Miss Lee was indignant and severe, and plainly told Grace she might save Harry if she would.

Severe had been the struggle ; bitter was the hour ; bitterer even than she had ever fancied

beforehand, for she could better have borne to part had he been in sorrow, or even anger—but to mock, to insult her . . . !

There he was singing and whistling and tossing up his cap. She looked wistfully at him; his slight, active, manly figure, that handsome head, and bright sunny hair; his voice too; those songs, and his winning way. She sprang back with sudden impulse.

“Harry, say good-bye kindly; look at me once, once more.”

He turned quickly, and looked keenly at her; perhaps she was relenting? But no, he too well understood her face. He retired a step, folded his arms on his chest, and made a sweeping low bow, then whistling turned away, climbed the hedge, and was gone.

The children exclaimed at his broken promise.

“Broken, broken, all is broken, even my poor heart,” Grace murmured to herself.

Repeating these words, she walked on like one staggered, and the children looked frightened and kept behind. They reached home without meeting any one. Judith was on the stairs, smiling she said,

“O, you are just too late; Miss Lee has been here. She ought to have acted in tragedy.

Quite a scene it was ; quite beyond my poor power of rendering again to you, though I am requested to repeat her words. She says . . . ”

“ Not now—not now,” Grace cried out, and Judith, utterly surprised at this unwonted wildness, stepped aside to let her pass. But Grace’s foot tripped, and she could not recover her balance ; she fell backwards, her head striking against the banister. She lay without motion and the blood flowed from her face. Judith screamed, and the little girls who were coming up stairs, screamed too.

The noise brought down Mr. Bracy from his work-room, disturbed in the middle of a difficult calculation. Mrs. Bracy awoke from a nap, and rushed out too. Seeing her lifeless, bleeding child, she fell into hysterics.

“ Get out of the way, Judith ; attend to your mother, children ; send Jane for the doctor !” said Mr. Bracy. “ A pretty piece of work is this,” he said, laying Grace on a bed. “ I always knew she would come to some confounded mischief, with her humbugging visiting the poor, and preaching and praying, growing uglier and paler every day. My God ! is she dead indeed !”

And the violent man felt a thrill of something more than fear, as he sought and felt for

her pulse, and gently smoothed back her hair to find where the blow was.

Grace was not dead, though in the first fright and hurry, a report got about that she was. The doctor said it was a narrow escape; an inch further and it must have been fatal; as it was, he feared a concussion. The blood was caused by her teeth cutting her lip severely.

Unconscious, save of pain, which she seemed to feel by her low unceasing groans, poor Grace lay, pallid as the pillow cover. Bitter tears were shed over her by her sick mother, who persisted in sitting by her, though not able to do more than hold her hand. The little girls told how Grace had cried, and how funnily she talked and looked, and something of the truth was thus surmised.

Mr. Bracy came in that night, and spoke of that reprobate Harry Vane's getting royally drunk, and behaving in so mad a way, that a constable was called in to frighten him."

"Hush—not so loud. Poor Grace—poor child," said the mother.

"Nonsense; she doesn't hear; and if she does, all the better. It is time her eyes were opened."

"If it had pleased the Lord to take her, per-

haps it would have been happier! Poor child—what trouble lies before her. Yet how could I spare her?" sighed Mrs. Bracy, as she watched by her daughter's side.

Judith's better feelings were roused, and she exerted herself to keep the little ones quiet in one room. But being alone with her father, she felt more of his temper than generally came upon her. She began to think Grace of more importance and use than she ever before believed, for Judith in her heart rather looked down on her sister. John was more morose and silent than ever, after uttering a few bitter words about Grace's worth coming out now she was dying; and Robert got terrible scoldings from his father, and frightened Judith by his wild practical jokes. He brought news at breakfast the next morning, that Harry Vane had cut his throat in a tipsy fit, after wandering up and down the street all night. Luckily, he had not succeeded further than giving himself an ugly gash. People said all sorts of things about him. One report was, he was going to marry mad Bessy, a half-witted but handsome girl, of no great repute. Another was, that his father was going to place him in a lunatic asylum. None of these stories were true entirely,

nor sooth to say without a slender foundation ; and no one knew exactly where he was.

At the end of a week from this accident, Grace still lying dangerously ill, Miss Lee was considerably startled, just as she was about to leave her parlour for the night, by a low tap on the shutter. "Thieves," was her first thought. "No, but a sweetheart of Anne's," the second, and Miss Patty prepared herself to greet the visitor with wrath and dignity. A hollow voice startled her. She did not recognize it till a hand was laid on her shoulder,—"Tell me how she is ; is she alive or dead ?"

"Harry, is it you ? Where are you ? Where have you been ? Come in directly, I insist. You are ill. Poor ill-used boy !"

"How is Grace ?"

"Well, no better ; very bad, they say."

"I murdered her."

"For pity's sake don't stand there, looking like—like—"

"Like Cain !" he interrupted, bitterly, but obeying her desire by stepping within the passage.

"My goodness me ! I do believe the world is gone mad !" exclaimed Miss Lee. "Every one has taken to exaggeration, and acting tra-

gedy. No common-sense to be found. Come in and warm yourself. Luckily, the fire is not out! You shall sleep here; the spare bed is aired. Pray, Harry, don't look so wild! You actually horrify me!"

"No wonder! I have no business here. I am an outcast. No wonder, Aunt Patty, if you are scared; that is, if all that is said of me is true;" and he laughed, mockingly.

"As if I believed it!" Miss Lee indignantly rejoined. "No, Harry, I shall never hearken to ill-natured talk. I know too well what it is. Poor boy! you have done it, certainly! How came you to drive your father to such extremity?"

"The last grain of sand weighs down the beast, they say. I did no more than I have done scores of times, shame on me. But he took to threatening, and altogether I was at bay—desperate! Yet, that evening—did I look so very bad? I did intend going home in good time, and being a good boy. Unluckily—for I am an unlucky dog—I met a fellow who has, I find now, too late, had a design in tempting me astray. Like a fool, I took the bait, and returned with him,—did no particular harm, but did not return till morning, and then—then—Well! you know the rest."

"Poor boy! It was foolish, though, Harry! And then, Grace Bracy,—what about her? She tumbled down stairs, so their own maid told me, and has concussion. She is but a puny creature. Why *you* are to come in for blame there, I can't tell!"

"I wish I could say so! No, Aunt Patty, she drove me mad and I made her mad. I thought she would stumble and fall: for I watched her, though she did not know it. I wished she would fall,—I would have picked her up; but she got on out of my sight, and reached home. Answer me truly—is she going to die?"

"Not a bit of it! Doctors always talk of danger, you know, to increase their skill. It suits the public to make up a romance. But people don't often die of a fall down two stairs. Harry! I am vexed, provoked with her, but I really think it is all for the best. She would never suit you! Look at her mother! Why, Grace was made in the same mould! Now, Judith has more stuff in her. She is something to look at. With all her pride and temper, I should rather have fallen in love with her. She, I hear, upholds you, and blames Grace. The fact is, Grace's head is turned by the Vicar. She sets up for a model, and, in my opinion, she

will end in a convent. Think no more of her, my boy. Now I'll go and see about your bed."

Miss Lee left Harry stooping over the fire: his hat still on his head. She groaned, as she went up stairs, at his miserable face, and was angry with the whole world. No one understood that boy. Every one attacked him! No mother, and a father cased in armour,—rigid and puritanical; with no knowledge of the world,—a severe, harsh taskmaster, rather than a tender father!"

How Miss Patty Lee pulled about the bed things, smoothed the pillows, drew the curtains, and did her best to give it a comfortable look: wishing in her warm heart to compensate to her darling for all his trouble. He should have a home with her. She was sure he had too good a heart to go altogether wrong."

At last she went down again,—but Harry was not there. "He is somewhere in the house," she thought, "and will be back again. He has let the fire quite out, thoughtless boy!" After a few moments, she looked about to see if everything was right for the night. A piece of paper, looking like a hastily-folded note, lay on the table. Miss Lee took it up. It was a note, written in pencil, and it was Harry's writing.

"DEAR AUNT PATTY,

"GOD bless you for your kindness. I shall never forget it. You welcomed the outcast when every other door was shut on him! But I can't stay here. I am off to a new country. Only I can't leave this land until I know *her* fate. So, if you love me, write to me the truth at the following address. . . . I shall there await certain tidings, whether it be life or death, and I shall meanwhile prepare for my new life. Try to believe me, though very good for nothing,

"Your grateful and loving 'boy,'

"H. V."

Then Miss Patty sat down and cried. She had not done such a thing for the last twenty years. Tears do not come readily with some persons, and others have a power of bidding them not flow; and then they go back like a dead, iron weight on the heart, and the countenance grows rigid, like a land lacking dew and rain.

Patty cried now till her head ached, and she was shivered and sick. Then, she rose up slowly, and went to her own room. For two days no one, not even Miss Stafford, gained admittance; and nothing poor Anne could cook and serve up

was eaten. Everything was neglected, and Patty sat erect in her chair, pale and still, like one in a dream. On the third day, she ordered dinner, and made a regular busy day of it,—rummaging out old stores and hidden corners, and alarming Anne, by making a bonfire of a heap of old letters. When her friends saw her again, they found no difference, except that she was rather more tart and abrupt than ever. Every day she sent her compliments, and begged to know how Miss Grace Bracy was. At last, the answer was, "better, and likely to recover." On which, Miss Patty Lee said, "Just like her mother! Making a fuss, and not dying, after all!" She wrote to Harry by that post, assuring him that Grace was getting well, and that, as she always guessed, it was "much ado about nothing." She advised him to go at once and begin his new life ; wished him well, and begged him to write to her. She also enclosed a present of a £50 note, "for although he had money of his own, young folks find more ways of spending than old."

CHAPTER IV.

It was drawing near to Christmas. The first time Grace ventured to say the service on a Sunday at home, she found to her surprise it was the last Sunday in Advent. The last few weeks had been like a dream to her. She was now quite out of danger, but sadly frail and weak. Her mother, on the contrary, seemed to have derived new strength from the call made on her. She looked better, and even happier. But the disease which sooner or later would destroy life, still existed. For it there was no cure; though freedom from all agitation and anxiety would tend to prolong life. Her father had died of disease in the heart, and she knew it might be her lot also. But although she had always moaned very much over small ailments, she showed a quiet and enduring courage in facing this decree. Her whole heart seemed now to be bound up in Grace. For her, she exerted herself even to try and be cheerful. For the first time in her life, she rejoiced over and admired the hot-house flowers intermixed with evergreens, which kind friends sent for Grace,

and when the poor girl smiled faintly, and touched them, with a tender look, the mother smiled too. They were much together, and perhaps that quiet time was the most free from trouble and worry they had ever known. But though Grace improved in strength, and gained more appetite, her spirits did not return. She would sit for hours looking at the fire, motionless, with a very sad, hopeless look, unless she knew her mother was watching her, and then the forced smile was a piteous sight.

The Vicar had often been with her in her illness. He, one day, broke the subject, and kindly and briefly expressed his sympathy, as well as his cordial approval of her conduct with respect to Harry Vane.

“ You think it was right then, sir ? ”

“ Surely—without believing all the stories afloat about the unhappy young man, there is enough to my knowledge to forbid any woman from giving him her love. Women do a great deal of injury by passing over sin, and calling it wildness, youthful folly, or other extenuating names. If they had courage and principle to control their love, and refuse a man of this character, it would tend to lessen the evil. Unhappily, a winning manner and amiable

temper, or even an excess of manly spirit, is allowed to blind the eyes and wins over really good women to call evil good. What is the necessary consequence? Her own standard must be lowered, or her heart ache because she loves what the ALMIGHTY hates."

"But cannot a person—a man alter and mend?" Grace timidly asked.

"Surely yes. God forbid I should say otherwise. But let the penitence and amendment be proved and accomplished beforehand. Let no girl hope to draw a man from evil ways as his wife. How often the experiment has failed. It is unnatural. For the wife ought to look up to her husband. The reverse cannot be a happy marriage."

Grace sighed heavily. Presently she observed, "He had no mother; she died at his birth."

"So I understand. Poor fellow; he may do well yet. I did not know him myself, for he avoided me pointedly; but I am glad he is gone to Australia; he had a poor chance here. There it is more easy for him to begin afresh. Depend on it, Grace, he will remember your sacrifice to principle and respect you for it. It may, by God's blessing, be partly the means of drawing him to a better mind."

"No—he thought me cold and fickle and cowardly. No—I have not—I never can do him any good: yet I hope, I hope, I was right. I try to think so, but, Mr. Carlton, my friends blame me. No one but yourself thinks me right. If he does get worse; if anything happens to him, how can I bear it?"

There was such pain in her voice and look, such sad fear and trouble in her very posture, that Mr. Carlton pitied her more than he could say. He offered to read, and after that, he contrived to draw her into a faint degree of interest in parish work.

"Her only hope lies in work—work, drawing her out of herself," he said, as he thought over his visit again in the quiet of his study.

Meanwhile Judith had not lost her wish or her hope, of inducing her father to give up his glove cutting business, and embarking in some other mode of employment; if indeed his income was not sufficient without it being necessary for him to work at all. She and Mr. Bracy calculated and planned, during the time they were left together and the mother was with Grace. Mr. Bracy had nearly settled to purchase a small estate about two miles from the town. The house was small, but would do.

It might with a little planting and cutting down and paint, be made a pretty country residence. The farm was good, and just sufficient to give employment, and not lead to ruin. John was to carry on their present business as a partner. It was too lucrative to be entirely given up. Their present house could be let, all but the workshop and a room for John.

Mr. Bracy did not think of consulting or even telling either wife or son about this. He was naturally fond of power, and this was a tempting opportunity of proving himself sole master and arbiter. When the deed was done, he informed his wife he intended removing to the Cross Farm at Lady-day. She was alarmed and hurt, but consoled a little by finding Grace light up and talk of country life, and the pretty wood which surrounded the new place.

On Christmas-day Grace joined the party at dinner: it bid fair to be a pleasanter gathering than usual. Mr. Bracy was in his best humour, and Judith extremely gratified and pleased, not only at the prospect of the new house, but at a curious event which had just occurred to her. The person who was most generally looked up to in the town was a certain widow lady, of rather large fortune. Not only was she one of an old and respected Heathercombe family, but

her own peculiar character and her marriage had also tended to make her in a small way queen of the place.

She was liberal and generous in an almost princely degree. She had been a celebrated beauty, and even now, in her age, preserved the remains of attractions not common. Her eye was formed to command, as well as to melt and win. Her manner was singularly sincere. She could be loving and tender ; she could also awe weaker spirits by her severe satire and downright strong will. She had no children, but filled her beautiful house with nieces and other young people. She patronised all gaiety, and kept up a succession of dinner-parties.

All the great folks visited Mrs. Eberley ; but she was not at all exclusive in her ideas. She spurned the notion of the two sets, and went herself as she pleased and when she pleased. It rather pleased her to invite people who did not visit, and in her imperious way command them to be agreeable and sociable. There was one sure passport to her favour,—one charm that could hide many defects,—and that was beauty. She was kind to the plain, but she showed them her pity ; and all her charm of manner and her brightest welcome was for the handsome.

There had been a discussion about Judith Bracy : some rather blaming her friends for bringing her out at the balls ; others thinking it very hard on the girl to be excluded. Mrs. Eberley heard, but said nothing. One day, however, she chanced to be in a shop at the same time as Judith. When the girl left, Mrs. Eberley asked who it was. "Miss Bracy ! why she is the belle of the county—a queen of beauty—the very style I most admire. So they look down on her, do they ? No doubt the Greens, with their pug noses, are afraid of her. But I will bring her out ! I will make Judith Bracy the fashion, or I am no longer Mrs. Eberley of the Hall !"

Thus spoke the proud old lady to her confidante, Miss Pelham ; who, however, ventured to hint, "it might not be for the girl's happiness to bring her out of her own station."

But Mrs. Eberley would not hear of this. "What was her station ? Bracy was a good old name. The man made the profession, and there was no need to include the whole family ; but to hide such beauty was cruel. She might make a good match."

"Miss Lee did take her out once or twice," Miss Pelham said ; "but after the first time

she had not danced much. Some of the gentlemen had held back, on account of the brother."

"Well, I shall see: whoever does not dance with Miss Bracy, shall never enter my house again!" said Mrs. Eberley; and she forthwith commanded Miss Pelham to go to the Bracys, and leave Mrs. Eberley's card, with an invitation to a quadrille party for the following week. She would make a party on purpose. She would see who would dare to oppose any introduction she chose to make.

Judith was greatly pleased at this visit. Her father too was proud and gratified. Mrs. Bracy observed she thought that poor Grace ought to go too, and no sooner said so than she repented; for it brought such a scornful and angry look on the poor girl from her father.

This prospect made Judith's bright eyes sparkle pleasantly on Christmas-day. Certainly, she looked very handsome in her new warm plaid dress, and a sprig of holly placed in her black hair. She and Robert laughed and joked; and on the whole the dinner went off smoothly, every one too busy to talk much. Mrs. Bracy's cheeks grew redder and redder with her nervous anxiety. Once Lydia's tears burst out, at a very rough reprimand from her father, and a

threat she should be sent to bed. John, too, always silent, seemed to his mother's anxious eyes more reserved than ever; and Grace looked fagged and weary.

But at last all the dangers were over: the pudding turned out well and properly cooked, to the mistress's intense relief; for she well knew that any defect would cloud the rest of the evening. The cloth was cleared away, and they all drew round the fire to enjoy the treat of a dessert. Mr. Bracy filled his wife's glass, and then remarked, with the pleasure of mystery,

"Well, this is the last Christmas we spend in this house. By the way, I have a toast to propose. Come, Mrs. Bracy, my future partner and manager of the business, Mr. John Bracy."

All eyes were of course turned to John. What they saw there caused surprise, and even alarm. His pale face seemed to be clouded over with an ashy grey hue; his deep dark eyes looked as if kindled into a blaze. He leant back in his chair, placing his hand firmly on his knees. There was a pause. No one spoke, no one sipped the wine. They expected him to speak, and to speak loudly and angrily too. At last it came, low as a whisper, clear as a bell.

"Since you have touched on this subject, sir, I may as well say now what I should say some other time, though I would not myself have chosen this moment. I don't pretend any surprise. Though you have not done me the honour of consulting—of 'consulting' me," he repeated, with a stress on the word as he caught a contemptuous expression of his father's, "your intentions have reached my ears. I have indeed heard it from several quarters; besides that, being neither blind, nor deaf, nor very slow of comprehension, my own observation would have informed me. You are, of course, at liberty to act as you think fit. I hope it will answer, though it seems rather like giving up a certainty for a mere speculation. But for my own proposed share in this plan, I beg distinctly to refuse working any longer at the business, either as hitherto without fixed wages, or as working partner. I thank you for your liberal proposal, but decline it."

He ceased speaking, deliberately sipped his wine, and then drew out his handkerchief and passed it across his brow.

A fearful oath broke the silence. Mr. Bracy, with fury and wrath in every feature and every limb, rose, and stood fronting the semicircle,

with his back to the fire. He looked all round on the eager, frightened, and surprised faces, and paused when he came to his wife.

"There, Lydia; I hope you have heard him! That is the fruit of your teaching, the reward a man gets for setting up a child in the world! A pretty set, truly. Verily, children are a blessing!"

Then, turning to John, with another string of words which made Grace cower and tremble, he said,

"You shall work at that, or you shall leave my roof, and never see a penny of mine: no, not even if you should die of want!"

"I don't apprehend such a catastrophe," John observed, in that cool, quiet tone most exasperating to one in a passion.

"Hold your tongue, and don't interrupt me, sir! You ought to be horsewhipped round the town. I'll—I'll—And pray, what is your reason for this act of rank insolent rebellion, this idiotic folly? Eh, sir?"

"That I am not bound to give. But since you are so kindly interested, sir, in the matter, I will say, that it is because I dislike the employment, and always have disliked it, and feel myself capable of better things. It is profitable,

very. It will be a considerable loss to your income if it is given up. Why not let Robert take it, sir?"

"No, not at your suggestion! And why should Robert take it, seeing he dislikes it as much as you do?"

"And why is the younger to be preferred to the elder?" said John more vehemently. "Why is he to follow his inclinations, and be made a gentleman, while the eldest son is forced into a trade he dislikes, in which there is no scope for his talents, against his will; kept down too, dependent for every penny, till he is nearly twenty-four? I say again—I protest against the injustice and tyranny! I will break the bond! I am free now and henceforth!"

"Free to go to the devil!"

"No, sir; my conscience and my taste forbid that road. I have however arranged my plans, as silently and as surely as you have yours; more silently, since no one knows but the one friend, who assists me."

"John—think, consider!" pleaded his mother, in her old weak wail.

"Mother, I have thought and considered for years."

"Pray, Lydia, don't interfere, but let the

fool go his own way," put in Mr. Bracy. "I've done with him. To-morrow I will receive the books, sir; mind, I find them correct to the uttermost farthing; and then you may go. This is the last night you pass under my roof."

"Last night was that, sir," said John rising. "I shall return to give up your books and the keys, and I will trouble you no longer with my presence. I will say good-bye now—now, this moment, sir. 'Fool!' you say. Look at this," he said, throwing off his cold and measured manner, and pointing eagerly to his broad and marked brow. "That is no fool's forehead. You may learn yet to retract your words. It may chance yet that on me rests the responsibility of keeping up the family honour and name. Mother," he added, in a gentler tone, "Don't cry, don't fret; I am going to make my fortune in another country. I have agreed to join a friend. True, I have no money, not a shilling, but I bring brains, strength, and energy. In that he feels I am richer than he is. He supplies the cash. Good-bye, mother."

But she clung to him, sobbing and wailing, and entreating him to wait till she was in her grave.

"Who is it? Who is this friend, John? Is it . . . ?"

"It is Harry Vane," John said.

This brought a fresh burst of anger from Mr. Bracy. "A nice choice; the greatest black-guard in the county! A nice pair! And so I am to understand, that the rascal, instead of being on the high seas, as I was given to understand, is yet here, sneaking about. I suppose *you* know something of this plot?" he said, turning to Grace. "I have a great mind to send you off too. This is your 'strong mind,' your 'excellent conduct!'"

"Father, I never heard of the scheme. I did not know he was here," Grace said.

"No, sir, Grace knows nothing of it, nor deserves to. She may find too late what she has lost. Happy would it be for her, if she was going as his wife. Harry has had his faults, but he would never be unkind to his wife," said John.

Mr. Bracy here ordered the younger children to go to bed at once, and uttering some coarse angry words against sobs and tears, he left the room, and soon his steps were heard as he passed the window.

Mrs. Bracy went off into hysterics; Judith

followed the crying children up stairs ; Robert yawned, and said "It was quite a play,—but he was sleepy." He stretched himself out on the floor and shut his eyes. John made signs for Grace to see to her mother, and quietly slipped away. Thus ended the Bracys' Christmas dinner.

Mrs. Bracy did not leave her bed on the next day. She moaned and wished they were all dead and at rest. Grace made great exertions to keep up, and succeeded pretty well. Mr. Bracy was very angry for some days, and then seemed to drop the matter, and interest himself in getting the new house ready. He had received the accounts, and found no fault ; John was gone, taking nothing but the clothes he wore, and his writing-case. Robert looked sulky at the notion of working at the business, even for a time : and Mr. Bracy entered into negotiation with a man to sell the concern. He articled Robert as a solicitor, but the lad's conduct gave great uneasiness to Grace. He did not mind hard words, and contrived to bring his father over to his own views. His temper was trying, so touchy and overbearing. There was nothing like peace in the house. Judith made a triumphant *entrée* at Mrs. Eberley's, and became

such a favourite, as to be constantly at the hall, even staying in the house. She was extravagant and vain, and very trying to Grace, laughing at her, and calling her a humbug, and prophesying all manner of evil to Harry, which she declared would be entirely Grace's doing.

CHAPTER V.

HEATHERCOMBE was a pretty place. It had both wood and water round it. One of the prettiest walks or rides was the short cut across the fields to Cross Farm. It was on the other side of the river. The wood clothing the hill side formed a beautiful object from the town, while the church and its handsome stone tower, was a great addition to the view from Cross Farm house.

The fields were just beginning to turn yellow, and sufficient rain had given a fresh green tint to the grass and the foliage. It was one of those rarely lovely summer evenings which make it a pleasure to live, and it struck one

as out of keeping with the scene, to see a young girl leaning on a stile, with a weary, sad look. She wore deep mourning, and stood long, not looking at and admiring the long shadows, or the cattle drinking in the river, nor turning once to look at the effect of light and shade on the bluff headlands in the distance. Grace Bracy's eyes seemed bent on the ground in deep and perplexed thought. She had been into the town for shopping, and was now on her way towards home.

Mr. Bracy had moved to this estate as he intended, and was very fortunate both in finding a tenant for his old house, and a man willing to give a fair sum to be paid yearly, for his flourishing business. Mr. Bracy was a successful man, people said. Unusually so, for a man so fond of new inventions, and in his own way a genius. Some clever hit he had made in machinery brought him both renown and riches. He could now take his place with other country squires, and his and Judith's ambition had been entirely satisfied. A great many people called on them on their removal to Cross Farm, and Mr. Bracy talked of giving dinner parties; but this and many other plans were knocked on the head by his wife's death. She never entirely

rallied after her son's departure, and anxiously as she looked and prayed for news of him, none ever came. The transplanting to a new home, gave the finishing stroke. She never left her bedroom when once she reached it, and in a month's time she was carried back to the town, and laid beside her four dead children.

Persons said it was a "happy release." Poor Grace often felt glad her mother was not here to suffer, but it was an inexpressible loss to her. She felt completely alone, and even worse than that—for troubles and trials seemed to thicken daily, and there was no one to go to for even a kind word—no one, she felt, who loved her.

Mr. Bracy's temper was much soured. Now when all trouble from outside pressure had ceased, when he had money and renown, and every comfort he desired, he seemed to create troubles for himself and those about him. Certainly his only remaining son must have been a source of anxiety. Robert thought because his father was well off, he might plunge into every kind of idle living and extravagance. He was no credit to his name. Instead of entering into society, which to a certain extent was very easy for him, Mr. Bracy avoided seeing even his oldest acquaintance. He was gloomy and mis-

anthropical, spending nearly whole days apart from his family, shut up in his own rooms, or sometimes wandering in a purposeless way about the estate. He did not interfere with Judith's visiting, though he sometimes sneered at it, and grumbled at her expenses.

Cross Farm was still in Heathercombe parish, and Mr. Bracy's dislike to the Vicar had gone so far, that he never now entered the Church at all, and if he had an opportunity he invariably opposed Mr. Carlton in the parish.

On her mother's death, Judith, as eldest daughter, naturally became head of the house, and she began to keep the keys and give orders. But she soon wearied of the labour, and found it took up too much of her time. She was often for days together with Mrs. Eberley at the hall, whose favourite she still was, and when things went wrong, and Mr. Bracy grew very angry, and did not spare her from severe blame, Judith made matters worse by arguing. Very painful scenes took place in this way, till one day in a pet, Judith brought the keys to Grace, who acted as governess to the little girls, and told her she had better take the housekeeping, and see if she could please better. Judith would never have to do with it again—never.

In vain Grace tried to reason and persuade; pointing out that Judith was so much more liked by her father, and had really more time, since Grace undertook the teaching. Judith would not yield. If Grace didn't like it, she might let it alone. Their father must hire a housekeeper.

"And we shall have a step-mother," Grace suggested.

"I don't care; matters can't be worse, and I mean to be quit of it all ere long. I'll have a home of my own," said Judith.

So Grace was forced against her will, and in fear and trembling lest it should displease her father, to be housekeeper. The only thing she insisted on was, that when Judith was at home, she should sit at the head of the table, and continue to act eldest daughter to visitors. To this Judith by no means objected, and she was less and less at home, and also increasingly reserved to Grace about her doings.

It was no small task to act thus with no great share of physical strength and always in fear, having to arrange and manage for all—to shelter Robert and the little ones from undue blame, and to receive no support, not a word of thanks, love or sympathy, from one week to

another. Grace had all to learn too. Her mother was never anything of a manager, and never had an establishment like the present to manage. Servants served ill, and took advantage of her ignorance and her timidity, and then Mr. Bracy was angry at unnecessary expense. Grace believed that he never realized being above want. The desire to save, and yet to make a certain show, grew stronger and stronger.

From early childhood, Grace had been somewhat of a dreamer, and was fond of reading of heroes and heroines, till she longed to have been a pilgrim or a knight herself. Then she thought she should like to devote herself and all she had, as a nun to religion, or she should like to go as a missionary to preach to the heathen. In her fancy she went through the different scenes, till she shed tears over her own devotion, and awoke from these day dreams to find her own life a very miserable affair.

Something of the feeling of self-sacrifice had moved and helped her in the great trial of giving up Harry Vane. Bitterly as she felt it, there was at first a sense of excitement, which in a certain sense pleased her. As time went on, this faded, and the sober matter-of-fact reality was hard to bear.

Like many other high-minded young people, she despised small household trials, and while she fretted or languidly sank beneath their weight, she believed she could willingly and bravely do some great deed. But all these thoughts and fancies had been locked in her own most secret bosom. Grace had never yet found a friend to understand her, or to care enough for her to draw her out. From being a sickly child, and living among stronger wills than her own, she had learnt to endure quietly, and people who saw her go through her duties so calmly, and take well-meant advice so meekly, little dreamt of all that passed in her mind, nor how much earnest and warm feeling existed beneath a somewhat inanimate and indifferent exterior.

Her greatest treat was to steal away alone, any where, and indulge in her own thoughts. Nothing but a conscientious sense of duty, kept her from doing this more than would have been good for her. She did not know the danger, but she knew there were certain duties lying straight before her as a child and sister, and knowing this, Grace could not be easy to neglect them. Thus unconsciously to herself, by the punctual performance of small duties, she was

gradually laying up a treasure, which in the hour of need would prove invaluable. Grace lamented her want of time to act any longer as a visitor or school teacher under the Vicar. One day she ventured to express her sense of utter uselessness, and his answer cheered her weary spirit for days and days. He said,

“No one is useless who sets himself to do the work lying nearest him. Glad as I am of help, Grace, I should be sorry to see you offer it now.”

It happened that on this evening, when Grace had allowed herself to rest at the stile and think, unusual and new perplexities tried her sorely. She longed for a friend’s advice, and actually went so far as to the Vicarage gate, resolved to open her mind to her kind friend and pastor; but at his gate, she thought that her father disliked and disapproved of him. Would it be right or kind in her to speak of home troubles to him?

After a brief struggle, she turned away to exercise her own judgment, weak and faulty as she felt it to be. She could but do her best, and trouble had not failed to teach her, as it is intended to teach us all, that there is One Ear

always open—One Arm always prompt and strong to help.

"Why here you are after all," said a cheery, but soft voice behind her; and Grace, somewhat startled, turned to see Miss Betsy Stafford's pleasant, kind face. "There have I been to see you! I rested quite an hour, and the little girls showed me their garden, and chickens, and bees. And just this very afternoon that I take it into my head to call on you, you choose to go into the streets for shopping! That is wasting such lovely weather, I think."

"I was obliged to go. And I also called on you, Miss . . . Aunt Betsy, mayn't I call you so?"

"To be sure, my dear; I am Aunt Betsy to all the parish; and indeed, Grace, it rather hurts me to find you and Judith come to 'Miss Stafford'!"

"Judith thinks it is not proper to be 'Aunting' or 'Cousining' people. She broke me of it. But when I see you, 'Aunt Betsy' will pop out."

"To be sure. Judith is grown such a grand and fashionable lady, I can't keep up with her at all. How very beautiful she is, my dear! Your father is proud enough, I dare say. And

how is he? The little girls said he had given orders not to be disturbed. Busy, I suppose, with his scientific experiments; but I think it almost a pity to keep in a room on such a day as this. My dear, I think the country about here grows more and more beautiful every year. I saw you were admiring it. Look, now, at the light on the hill."

"I fear, beautiful as it is, it was lost on me, Aunt Betsy. The truth is, I was full of my own wretched thoughts."

"Ah, my dear! well, we must think now and then. But I hope when you say wretched, there is no particular,—no new trouble, is there?"

Grace hesitated, coloured, and then burst into tears. "If it can do you any good to speak of it, tell me, my dear. I have seen various trials in my life, and may be I might help you a little. I often think of you, Grace, so bravely doing your duty alone, as one may say. Is it of Robert, my love?"

"No. Yes. That is—there is always trouble about him, I fear, too. O, Aunt Betsy, I live in fear of what may happen any day, and will, I believe, sooner or later. Can nothing be done? Will he hearken to no one? Sometimes I think if he would leave this place ——"

"Ah, my dear, consider the pain of separation; never knowing even if he is alive or dead."

"True. Yes, that is bad, indeed. No, we have had enough of that," Grace whispered.

"Won't Robert mind you, my dear?"

"No: or if he would, something else comes between us; and besides, I am not one to lead others. I can't get people to like or love me as Judith does," Grace said in a desponding tone. "But she won't speak to Robert, in fact—I fear—I may speak to you; but the secret of all is, Aunt Betsy, I am very, very unhappy about her! Indeed, I am."

To this Betsy made no reply. Her face was grave, and seemed to bear a silent testimony that Grace was right. At least, so the girl understood it; for she exclaimed eagerly, "Have you heard? O Aunt Betsy, do you know anything of it?"

"Nothing. I only know from my own observation, as well as from the tittle tattle of the town, that Judith is gay,—dresses rather too much, perhaps,—and is a little more free in her manners than old folks quite like. It is a trying position for her, to go out so much, to be so much admired, and to have no mother or relation. Mrs. Eberley is kind, but she lacks judg-

"Don't look so very sad, my dear Judith is very sensible, and is surely up to nature. I assure you I hear nothing ~~nowhere~~ ~~nowhere~~ I have told you."

"This is bad. Extravagance leads to—
and that's it! O I feel sure all is
not ~~nowhere~~ ~~nowhere~~ it; and I am so powerless to
~~nowhere~~ ~~nowhere~~ though poor Judith thinks I
~~nowhere~~ ~~nowhere~~ a little money, since I draw
~~nowhere~~ ~~nowhere~~ I sometimes don't know
~~nowhere~~ ~~nowhere~~ or wrong, I get so puzzled; and
~~nowhere~~ ~~nowhere~~ the same men, as you know.
~~nowhere~~ ~~nowhere~~ I dare not trouble him;
~~nowhere~~ ~~nowhere~~ to keep all these things from
~~nowhere~~ ~~nowhere~~ I asked a liberal allowance, and
~~nowhere~~ ~~nowhere~~ more than enough, so I
~~nowhere~~ ~~nowhere~~ If I had only an allow-
~~nowhere~~ ~~nowhere~~ help; for not going out,
~~nowhere~~ ~~nowhere~~ But father said there
~~nowhere~~ ~~nowhere~~ to have it. I must buy
~~nowhere~~ ~~nowhere~~ on the accounts; and so
~~nowhere~~ ~~nowhere~~ I could earn a little, do
~~nowhere~~ ~~nowhere~~ willingly work. And
~~nowhere~~ ~~nowhere~~ that it is no wonder if
~~nowhere~~ ~~nowhere~~ increased."

"How have you to be working?
Judith must ever-

cise self-denial, and curtail her expenses. You must set it before her plainly as a duty ; and if you know—are sure—she is running into debt, let me advise you to speak to your father. It is no kindness to her to allow it to go on. My poor child, yours is no easy task ; your home no bed of roses."

"That I don't mind ! I always rather wished for trials. I should not mind roughing it and being poor, and working ever so hard ; but, to have one's life frittered away by such mean cares, such petty vexations, that I do regret ; though the Vicar does say our nearest duty is our first duty. But so often I question if it is duty at all—if I am not getting over-careful and anxious ?—always counting up bills and seeing faults ; and—and—I can't make a cheerful, happy home for father, or Robert, and Judith, whatever I do ! They, each and all, say that I weary them with my dismal face, and then they go elsewhere for cheerfulness, and that leads to mischief. I wonder what I can do !"

"Do your best, and cultivate a cheerful and hopeful spirit. You can do no more. All will seem like a dream, like a tale that is told, soon. You are inclined to be rather sad-hearted, ain't you ? You mistrust yourself and lean on others ;

ment sometimes. Don't look so very sad, my dear. Judith is very sensible, and is surely open to advice. I assure you I hear nothing worse than I have told you."

"But that is bad. Extravagance leads to—
to debt—and that's it! O I feel sure all is
not right about it; and I am so powerless to
help or advise, though poor Judith thinks I
could command a little money, since I draw
for the house bills. I sometimes don't know
if I am right or wrong, I get so puzzled; and
my father is not like some men, as you know.
He is so easily excited, I dare not trouble him;
but rather strive to keep all these things from
him. He makes Judith a liberal allowance, and
I know he thinks it more than enough, so I
dare not ask for more. If I had only an allow-
ance for myself, I could help; for not going out,
very little does for me. But father said there
was no occasion for me to have it. I must buy
what I want, and put it in the accounts; and so
I do. Is there any way I could earn a little, do
you think? I would so willingly work. And
Robert is so thoughtless that it is no wonder if
father is vexed and frightened."

"My dear, what time have you to be working?
You do all you can as it is. Judith must exer-

cise self-denial, and curtail her expenses. You must set it before her plainly as a duty ; and if you know—are sure—she is running into debt, let me advise you to speak to your father. It is no kindness to her to allow it to go on. My poor child, yours is no easy task ; your home no bed of roses.”

“ That I don’t mind ! I always rather wished for trials. I should not mind roughing it and being poor, and working ever so hard ; but, to have one’s life frittered away by such mean cares, such petty vexations, that I do regret ; though the Vicar does say our nearest duty is our first duty. But so often I question if it is duty at all—if I am not getting over-careful and anxious ?—always counting up bills and seeing faults ; and—and—I can’t make a cheerful, happy home for father, or Robert, and Judith, whatever I do ! They, each and all, say that I weary them with my dismal face, and then they go elsewhere for cheerfulness, and that leads to mischief. I wonder what I can do !”

“ Do your best, and cultivate a cheerful and hopeful spirit. You can do no more. All will seem like a dream, like a tale that is told, soon. You are inclined to be rather sad-hearted, ain’t you ? You mistrust yourself and lean on others ;

so, for you, the way is to look on the bright side of every thing and trust in God ; while you must try not to worry yourself by too close and anxious scrutiny of your motives, or be too cast down, if you do not always succeed. To take advice and want sympathy is one thing—never to trust oneself to act by one's own judgment, another.”

“ I see, I see ! and this want of faith in myself leads others to mistrust me too. But what can be done if I see daily and hourly how I do mistake, and say and do just the wrong thing ; if, in fact, I am not about the work for which I am fitted—for that is the real truth, Aunt Betsy.

“ I believe I could visit among the poor, and teach children, and so on. I could, I think, bear even hardships for the glory of God ; but as manager of a house—to keep the peace in a family—for this, I am not able—not fit.”

“ Never say so ; don’t think it, my dear. Depend on it the Almighty places us where we are best off, though we can’t see why now. One thing I do think you need. You need a little rest and change. Your bodily strength is feeble, and your spirits low. Grace, I must try what I can do, to persuade your father to lend you to me for a while. No, don’t say no ;

the children too. It will do us all good, I am sure. Now I must be going, my dear child. Good-bye!"

"Thank you. You have done me great good, Aunt Betsy; and I feel braver to go home now. I was so dreading it just before you came up that I had half a mind to run away." They parted then, Grace really comforted as she said by a few kind helping words.

CHAPTER VI.

"GRACE, it is of no use trying to stop me, I tell you. I must have money, and you must get it for me. Now don't look wretched and sulky, there's a dear," said Judith a few evenings after that on which Grace had met Aunt Betsy. The sisters were going to bed, and while Judith brushed her long hair, she tried alternate coaxing and threatening.

"As I have said, so I say again, Where and how am I to get money?"

"Judith, you must spend only what you are

allowed : and what is more, I am come to a determination, that ——”

“ What determination, pray ? If you think you are going to set up as my guide and mistress, you are quite mistaken ! I don’t see how it concerns you how much I spend.”

“ Then why do you come to me about it ?”

“ Simply because you have chosen to take the head and management of the house ; and therefore you are the proper person to provide me what I want.”

“ You are unjust, Judith, as you know ; but let it pass. The fact is, I believe you are at this very moment in debt. Is it so ?”

Judith coloured up. “ I need not confess to you, my little missionary ; and you need not pull so long a face—just as if you were going to preach a sermon. Yet, I don’t care ; you are welcome to an answer. Yes, I am in debt ; and therefore money I must have.”

“ Then, Judith, I will go to father and ask him for it ; but I shall tell him the truth. I am sure it is right ; and, however painful, it must be done.”

“ Grace, I dare you to do so ! Tell my father that ! Are you mad ? I tell you when I have cleared off those tiresome bills, and set myself

up as I must be for this journey, I shall be in a position to be independent of further help. It is a great opening for me—a grand opportunity. I know what I am about, but interference will ruin all. Grace, I shall probably be ‘my lady.’ What do you think of that now? Isn’t the prospect worth a little outlay?”

“It is never worth doing wrong, even—”

“Spare me any sermons or lectures: they never do me any good. I am determined, somehow or other, to do this thing; and if I am not helped to do it in a proper way, why then—”

Judith wound up with a toss of her head, and a look which gave great pain and alarm to Grace.

And there was reason for alarm. Judith had been for some little time acting in a way her sister did not quite understand. Curious and unpleasant rumours reached her by the servants and visitors; and Judith herself sometimes let out hints that she was playing a deep game.

A lady, rather young, though a widow, and very gay, had been staying at the Hall, and there had met and made acquaintance with Judith. They suited, and fell at once into a strong friendship. Mrs. Hall insisted on Ju-

dith's walking, and driving, and singing with her, and roused all her latent ambition by painting the conquests she would make, if introduced to a larger field than such a "slow, dull place as Heathercombe."

Mrs. Hall was going abroad for the winter; and as her sister was, from ill health, obliged to give up accompanying her, she fixed on Judith as her companion. Nothing could please Judith more; and it was to set herself up with a full and complete wardrobe that she now wanted money. There were, besides, old standing bills which she would like to pay before leaving home.

When she had once alluded to the invitation, her father had not positively said no to it; but it was becoming needful to get a clear consent, and the means, and Mr. Bracy was more than ever angry at being asked for money, and less and less accessible to his daughters.

Grace did not think the scheme at all a wise one. From what she heard and saw of Mrs. Hall, and Mrs. Hall's cousin, Sir Charles Sandon, she believed them to be very undesirable friends for her sister. But Grace had no influence; and she found that her speaking against a thing rather added to Judith's determination to do it.

"Grace, will you get the money? will you ask father?" again said Judith.

"If I do, I shall tell the whole truth. And, besides, I wonder at your persisting in choosing me to ask: you know so well how little my father—likes—me!"

Her voice dropped low at the end.

"Well, if you won't do it, I shall get some money from Robert. I can do so; and I shall leave bills to some amount to come in when I am far away from this. I shall take French leave, and say nothing about it. It is very hard, so rich as father is, that I should be grudged what I want!"

Grace knew that Judith would do what she threatened, and she trembled at the consequences of such bold disobedience. Judith would be turned off—forbidden her father's home. She might not care; Grace feared she would not. But might it not drive her to some desperate and dangerous course? And the remembrance of a hard, evil-looking face paying bold compliments, and showing almost insolent attention to Judith, caused poor Grace to shudder. That dreadful Sir Charles! and Mrs. Hall, so giddy and thoughtless!

After a long, silent consideration of all this,

Grace rose to leave the room. She said quietly, and with effort,

"I will do my best for you, Judith ; but, for heaven's sake, don't be rash ! Don't bring more trouble on us ! Do be careful ! Oh, I wish you would give up going with those people!"

Judith only laughed, and, for a wonder, she kissed her sister, and thanked her for her promise of help.

No sleep did Grace get that night : she dreaded the conversation with her father more than she could say. It was positive pain to her ; and all the next morning she was hot and cold by fits, and nervous to a degree.

When the lessons were over, finding that Mr. Bracy was in his work-room, Grace determined to go at once and seek an interview. It was indeed like braving a lion in his den !

The result of Grace's interview—for there is no need to write such painful details—was a stern order for the culprit Judith to appear before him, with an exact list of her debts, that evening after tea. Mr. Bracy's pride, if no better feeling, would not allow of a daughter's bills being unpaid. The need for further outlay was peculiarly irritating, as he had another scene with his son the day before ; and also he had lately

expended a good sum on some instrument for his own experiments, which had proved a thorough failure and loss.

As to Judith's going abroad with Mrs. Hall, her father swore he would not consent. She must stay at home and learn to be steady. A good prospect lay before her, which he insisted on her accepting, under penalty of his disowning her. A very good proposal of marriage had been made to him for her, he said ; one which she, in her pride and vanity, might think lightly of, but which was only too good for her ; and Grace was advised to urge her acceptance of it directly. Who it was, he did not tell Grace. His bitter anger, his violent language, and even more, his complaints of home troubles and the miserable life he had led, upset Grace entirely. He said he had no comfort from his wife, and none in his children ; launched out again in the old way about Grace's being "religious," and flattering that Vicar ; and went on to almost abuse her bad housekeeping and stupid way of teaching her sisters, who, he said, were a set of ignorant, dirty little dunces, a disgrace to him and herself. He said she had had a fair trial ; and if she did not very soon turn over a new leaf, he should find some one else to do her

work, and she'd find herself not quite so much mistress as she fancied. Grace did sigh out, "What *can* I do? If you would but tell me!" But he deigned no reply: only, catching the look of almost agony in her face, and seeing her shaking hand as she lifted a book he had ordered her to take away, a bitter shadow of actual loathing dislike crossed his face, and he bade her "be gone at once!"

"Well," said Judith, having watched for Grace's coming out.

"No, nothing well, nothing good. O Judith! if I could but make my father even not dislike me so! My very presence near him is hateful to him."

"Oh, it is of your own affairs you are full! I thought you went to speak for me! Just like you—selfish and sulky, and always so dismal! Of course you bungled; I knew how it would be!"

Finding that Grace did not answer or appear to notice these stinging words,—for in her extreme dejection she would gladly be spared another syllable,—Judith tried other means; and conquered her temper so far as to speak more civilly, and beg Grace to tell her what had passed.

When she had heard all, having followed Grace to her bedroom, and shutting the door for privacy, Judith's handsome face seemed, after the first passionate flash of anger, to turn to stone. Her eyes looked fierce and determined, but her first remark was,

"Did he say from whom this proposal came?"

"No."

"I know: the fool has been trying to please me, worrying and boring me for weeks. Mr. Bracy doesn't really think I would have him! It is a mere sham—a threat!"

"And you will write down all; don't keep any back," Grace turned to say, as she left. "It *is* kind of him to pay, for indeed he has had many serious calls lately. Judith, try—try to please him, to comfort him; he does like and love you!"

"Thank you for your advice, and for your able management of this affair."

Grace hastened away, stung by the irony of her manner, and not understanding what Judith meant to do. A throbbing headache made it utterly impossible for Grace to leave her room again. She managed to get into bed with a servant's help, who closed the shutters, and entreated to be allowed to send for the doctor.

But Grace only begged for quiet, and that the little girls might be kept out of her father's way.

At last she gained relief from the pain of body and mind, and fell asleep. She awoke to find it nearly dark—bed-time, as the maid said, and not worth while for her to get up then at all.

Two hours later the maid came to see if Grace wanted anything; and finding her better, let out that master seemed to be in a great way, stamping about, and asking after Miss Judith.

"And where is she?"

"I don't know, miss. No one hasn't seen her since dinner-time. Master had his dinner sent to his room, and Miss Judith carved. Likely enough she's in the town, and may return now. It isn't so very late, but she's often been later: only wouldn't advise her to come in her papa's way, for he do seem out-of-the-way angry at her; for he says he stopped at home on purpose to see her."

"So she has actually avoided going to him! O Judith!" thought Grace; and uneasy and anxious, she got up, and put on her dressing-gown to watch and listen.

She could see the path across the last field, if

Judith walked home ; or if she returned in a friend's carriage, she should see it at the gate. So she sat at the window.

It was a calm, bright moonlight : the still, solemn feeling it gave her soothed her cares, and carried her away to the hour when this beautiful world would be dissolved. "Like a scroll!" she repeated ; "and the sun and the moon darkened ; and there will be signs in the heavens." Her thoughts then flew to the parable of the wise and foolish virgins, and the clear commentary made on it by Mr. Carlton one day in school. And Grace prayed for herself, for her father, for Judith and all ; yes, for another, too, never forgotten at such moments.

But how dreary life seemed, and how long it might be ! She was not two and twenty ; and in this lonely spot, this ideal of a quiet English country home, how much distress, and bitterness, and trouble there was. But just now she did not long and yearn to go away and leave it all. She earnestly prayed for help to make things better.

If only Judith were different, what a comfort it might be ! How much one so clever and agreeable might do with each and all ! And

perhaps she would. When once Mrs. Hall was gone, after the first disappointment and resentment at being thwarted, perhaps Judith would be glad to resume her right place in the house. Grace resolved to strive her very utmost to please and "suit" her sister better; to try and enter more into her pursuits and pleasures, and not be such a kill-joy and stupid, dull creature, as Judith always found her.

Her reverie was disturbed by her father's voice, pitched high and shrill.

"Lock up the doors! it is after twelve. If she comes, she may get in as she can, or not at all. I will teach her to behave in this way again! Why, Robert has been home this hour and more!"

Then there was a sound of shutting up, and the house-door chain rattled, and Mr. Bracy's own door was banged. Stillness followed. But Grace continued her watch, fearing and hoping to see her sister or some messenger. It was so clear and still, she could hear the church clock strike out the hours at Heathercombe. She could see the white houses, and she wondered in which Judith was.

At last, just about dawn, Grace fell asleep where she sat, her head on the sill.

"Here's a note I found, Miss, quite by chance, as I may say. Very careless to trust it in that fashion. It lay under the front door, as if somebody had squeezed it under," said the maid.

It was from Judith. Grace wondered she had not seen the messenger. It must have come lately, while she slept.

"**DEAR GRACE,**

"This is to inform you that I am neither drowned nor hanged, which your fancy might persuade you to suppose. When you get this I shall be far away. I leave my home: no explanation is needed; and I scarcely think any one will care to know more. If they do, let me assure them, that I have found consideration and kindness; nay, more than that. Mr. Bracy need not trouble himself about any disgrace attaching itself to his name by my bills; they will be paid. For the present,

"**JUDITH BRACY."**

It was no use reading and re-reading this, and turning it round and round. That was all! Grace could not understand it, and began to think it must be the fault of her own stupidity.

Should she tell her father, or show him this? Or would it not be wiser to wait, for either Judith was joking and would return, or she would write again and explain.

But the maid told her master of the note, and Grace could not do otherwise than show it.

Mr. Bracy hurried off at once, without breakfast, to find out more in the town. He uttered many threats, and ended with declaring he didn't care if she was gone. She should never come back, that was all!

Robert pained and distressed Grace by insinuations and jokes, that Judith had eloped; and Grace was glad when he went to his office.

During the day, one or two absurd reports were brought by tradesmen's errand boys, and duly repeated and added to by the servants. But Mr. Bracy did not return, and Grace was sick with suspense, till unable to bear it any longer, she determined to walk to the town. What she was to do there she did not know. She might meet her father, or see Aunt Betsy, or hear something. Perhaps Judith was at the Hall; but then she remembered that the note said "far away."

Not a soul did she meet; and when once in the street, she began to be afraid of seeing her

father, and his being angry at her leaving home. Or, what if he had returned by the road, and was asking for her? So she irresolutely stood for a moment, wishing strongly to go on and call on Miss Stafford, though she knew it was ten chances to one if she was at home at this hour. However, she did go there; and after a little doubt if her mistress was in or out, Grace was asked by the servant to wait in the parlour, and in another moment had the pleasure of hearing Aunt Betsy's voice on the stairs.

"Do you know—have you heard anything of Judith?"

"My dear child, no; why, is she not at home? Yes, I did hear Miss Patty Lee answering Mr. Mortlock in the street, to be sure, and I remember Judith's name was spoken; but I was full of my business."

"Is she at Mrs. Eberley's?" she asked, when Grace told her of Judith's going away yesterday.

Grace did not speak of the note yet, so fearful was she of doing harm. "It might be a joke, one of Judith's practical jokes to alarm me," she constantly said to herself, her beating heart all the time contradicting it.

"You look fit to faint," said Aunt Betsy;

"sit here quietly. Mary shall make you a cup of coffee, and I will go to the Hall and inquire if Judith is there, and be back again in no time." And she was gone while she said it.

When the servant brought the coffee, Grace thought she seemed about to say something, she lingered on in the room, and cleared her throat so often.

" You are hurried, ain't you, miss? Them reports are very unpleasant. 'Tis such a place for making up stories; but says I, directly I heard it, I don't believe one word, I said."

" What have you heard? Do tell me, Mary!"

" Such nonsense—that Miss Bracy got married this morning, all private-like, and they're gone away with a coach and four. She's such a handsome young lady, and gets so much courting, you see, there's no end of reports about her. You'd be frightened to hear the half!"

She stopped, seeing how pale Grace became. But she tried to laugh and treat it as Mary did; while, full of restless anxiety, she got up and looked out of window for Miss Stafford's return.

CHAPTER VII.

IT was not long before Miss Stafford returned. Her step was somewhat slow, and her countenance not like one that bore good news.

"My dear," she said, "it is very strange. What were Judith's plans? Did she leave no message, no note?"

"Yes, a note, such as it is. At least, our servant found it squeezed under the door. But I can't make it out. Oh, Aunt Betsy, tell me all! Mary says such shocking things; and I see by your face it is all true. Tell me all!"

"Mary! I have been to the Hall. Mrs. Eberley was quite excited. You know, she is an odd woman, though very kind. She said your father had already been there, demanding his child. She was deeply offended, I saw; and says it is a lesson to her not to patronise young girls. Judith has evidently not been to her. Mrs. Eberley had not heard of her disappearance till your father came."

"Mary says that they talk of her being married and going away," Grace said. "Where is

Mrs. Hall ? Where is that cousin Sir Charles ? Do you know, Aunt Betsy ?”

“Mrs. Hall left this morning, so Mrs. Eberley says : Judith could not be with her therefore. As to Sir Charles Sandon, he left—well, I believe it was yesterday ; I don’t know. My dear, surely—have you any reason to think—”

Miss Stafford stopped short, not liking to say more. Grace, in a broken voice, told what her sister had said, and what she had herself observed and disliked. The note, too, which she repeated, made Aunt Betsy shake her head gravely. But still she said they must not condemn without further proofs. There was nothing for it but patience. Grace must go home, for her father’s sake ; and as she was so ill and shaken, Aunt Betsy offered herself as companion, and even consented to remain the night there.

Just as they left the town, and were about to climb the first stile, the Vicar came upon them, looking tired and dusty.

In answer to Aunt Betsy’s inquiries, he said he had walked far. It was dusty and hot, too. Then he looked at Grace inquiringly but kindly, and even took her hand and said, “Poor girl, this is very hard for you.”

Grace could not syllable the question which arose. The tone of kindness made her feel ready to choke. But Aunt Betsy spoke for her.

" You have heard, then, sir ? "

" Indeed I have. Yes, reports of various kinds reached me this morning in the town ; some exceedingly absurd, of course, but one was serious enough to make me anxious. I had some business at Blackridge, and accordingly walked there after morning service. You are aware it is on the road to E——, and that there is a capital posting-house there ? Well, as I sauntered through the burning, long street —one of the most thoroughly uninviting of all small country towns I know—I was aware of a group round the inn : nothing unusual, perhaps ; but gazing is infectious, and seeing my fellow-creatures staring, I stared also. A post-chaise stood at the door—a chaise and four. Into this I saw a lady handed by a gentleman. It was like a flash of lightning ; they were out of sight before I could turn about to ask a question. I thought—not till afterwards, though—that the figures were familiar to me, though both were hidden by wrappers and a veil. I heard afterwards that a gentleman had driven up in a gig, and ordered the fleetest

horses they had, with a large bribe for speed. A lady was with him ; but all I discovered was that she was in black, with a very thick veil. The gentleman's servant was sent back here to Heathercombe with commissions ; he rode, and left the gig at Blackridge. This is all I could discover. Now, I think inquiry should be made about this servant ; unless, indeed, you have heard elsewhere."

"No, nothing. It must be my sister : it fits in with her own note. Oh, can nothing be done to save her ? O Judith, Judith ! this will kill my father !" poor Grace ejaculated.

In the course of a few days the Vicar learnt that a servant of Sir Charles Sandon had been in the town, paying his master's bills ; but the man could never be met with, and was now gone.

No further account reached the family. Mrs. Eberley heard from Mrs. Hall—a lively letter, in her usual style, but speaking of Judith's still accompanying her to Italy : wherefore, Mrs. Eberley inferred that Judith was not with *them*, and she haughtily resented any idea of the sort, as reflecting on herself.

She was very severe on the poor girl ; for ever since the foreign tour was hinted at, Mrs. Eberley became annoyed. She disliked any

one's going to foreign lands. It was one of her peculiar dislikes; and she now put all the mischief, if mischief there was, to Judith's wish to go amongst the "wretched French," &c.

In course of time Mrs. Hall was reported to have left England. Of her cousin nothing was known. Mrs. Eberley only knew him through Mrs. Hall, and concluded he was with his regiment, wherever that might be. Not a word reached Cross Farm of Judith's fate. Mr. Bracy struggled against showing how much this grieved him; but there was an alteration in his whole appearance, and it seemed to make him more cross and difficult to please at home.

Grace had to hear many allusions which made her heart ache—that it was much owing to her own great unamiability and dulness, that her sister had found her home dull. Mr. Bracy was perpetually threatening a governess for the little girls, which made Grace work very hard to prevent it. She could hardly trust to her father's choice, and an unpleasant person in her lonely life would make many things worse.

She hoped that the expense might make him give it up, and scarcely ever left the children, lest their voices or plays should disturb their father and bring the much dreaded governess.

CHAPTER VIII.

GRACE's pale cheeks were flushed, and her whole appearance denoted nervous irritation, painful to see.

She was in the small back parlour, generally used as school-room, and after many vain attempts had at last succeeded in persuading the elder of the four children to attend to her reading lesson, while the second was sobbing and fretting over a sum ; and a third behind Grace's back had upset her work-basket, and was enjoying her mischief, by further entangling the reels of cotton.

"Do try and attend, Lydia ! That is not 'displeased.' Spell it. It is 'displaced.' Yes !" she said in answer to a voice without. "Oh ; there is Robert ! What am I to do ! Now if he comes in to talk, you take your sewing : do you hear, Lydia ?" And Grace turned with a heavy sigh and very weary air to the door as her brother bounced in, scolding her all the time for letting him call till his throat was sore.

"I am always engaged, always busy at lessons at this time," Grace said with slight displeasure.

"Bother the lessons! Send them off! I want you! I can't talk before them all!"

"Can't you wait?" she asked in a piteous tone, which he directly took up and mimicked, so as to bring laughter from the children. "No verily, I can't, poor misery mortal, wretched little martyr!"

Grace flushed up, but said nothing. She did not even further remonstrate when he pulled the books and the work away, and bade them go off anywhere for ten minutes. Grace sighed, but remained still, her head leaning on her hand.

It was some time when the room was quiet, before either spoke. Robert seemed to have lost his courage, or he was in an absent fit. Grace was too tired and out of heart to volunteer a syllable.

"Lend me some cash, Grace."

She looked up at him, but did not meet his eye. He was bent on disentangling a knotted piece of string.

"Are you deaf, or dumb? Will you lend me a little money?"

"Robert, I have none!"

"Gammon! Come, do be kind and civil. Don't drive me into a corner this once. The

fact is, you see, a lot of fellows are going to have a day shooting sea-fowl. I'd give my hand and go too—and they'll sneer and laugh if I don't—and I can't without a little tin. I'm so hard up. Come, this once. I'll never ask you again."

"O, Robert!" She could not help showing how she despised this oft made, oft broken promise.

"I'm in sober earnest now. Upon my word, it is the last time I shall ever be asking you. You'll be sorry—you will, if—but you must not, you cannot refuse. I know you have money. I saw him hand over lots of notes three days ago. Give me the key. If you are tired, I'll bring your desk here."

"That was money to pay bills. It is not mine. I haven't got a sixpence of my own."

"I don't care. I will have it. Tell what you like. Do as you think right." And he hastened to her desk which stood on a small table by the window. It was unlocked; the keys were in it; for Grace had been interrupted in her accounts by a summons from her father to go to his room, where he required her help in some of his experiments.

She started up and laid her hand on Robert's

arm. "He will be so very angry, Robert! I dare not!"

"But I dare. Let me alone. You may say I did it in spite of you. I don't care. Only let me have thirty shillings." And he violently tossed out the money, confusing the little heaps she had carefully made for the different bills, caught up two sovereigns, and as quickly as possible—before she had time to take it in—he jumped out of the low window, and was gone.

Grace was annoyed with him; very angry at his violence and selfish disregard of her. She had only time to put her desk a little straight; and locking it, put the keys into her pocket, when the sounds of a loud and frightened cry reached her. Then there was her father's voice, loud and angry—more cries—and the sound of a switch. She ran out, to find Lydia screaming with terror and pain, as her father struck her neck and arms with his riding whip. Seeing Grace, she ran to her, sobbing out—" Didn't he—didn't you send us out?"

"I told you, if ever I caught you out idling in school hours again, I would make you smart," Mr. Bracy said, shaking his whip. "What business have you out here at this hour? A pretty teacher you make," he added, turning to

Grace. "The Parson has been asking for you to take a class in his Sunday School, and I told him you had better learn to teach at home first. But it is the same throughout! Every thing neglected!"

Grace's excuses were not heard. Mr. Bracy mounted his horse, saying, he was going to put an end to it all. She'd find things rather different in future.

It was as much as Grace could do to restore peace and quiet among the children. Lessons were out of the question. Tired and miserable as she was, she tried to fix their attention by reading to them.

"Anna says we are to have a governess, like the Miss Mornes," remarked one of the children when Grace paused from fatigue.

"Shall you like it?" Grace said.

"Yes: she won't be so dismal or so strict as you. She'll teach us to work collars, and to dance. I wish she was coming."

"I don't," sobbed out Lydia, who had a kind of selfish affection for Grace, and was no favourite with any one else. "I'd rather have Grace. I wont learn of any one else."

"You mustn't say that. Very likely you'll have to do so," said Grace.

"Anna says papa doesn't like you, Grace, and that you haven't any spirit," Esther went on.

Grace shook her head, and reproved her for repeating what this new maid Anna said.

"Anna said she'd persuade papa to let us go with her on Sunday. She says he does what she asks him."

"I don't like Anna a bit," said Lydia. "She calls me a fretty, naughty girl, and says I have a cross temper like Grace; and she said"—lowering her voice—"that mother was just the same."

"Anna is very wrong to talk so," Grace observed, more hurt than she cared to show; for this new servant had added greatly to her troubles, being a bold and insolent person, who presumed on old acquaintance with some members of Mr. Bracy's family. Already she had contrived to set Grace's wishes and orders at defiance, and to bring her into scrapes with her father. Grace suspected her of trying to set the little girls against her before, and this confirmed it. She had offended Anna by telling her it was the rule of the house for no servant to remain out of a Sunday Evening without special leave. Anna broke the rule again a second time; and when spoken to by Grace, told her insolently,

that "she had her master's leave, and that was all she needed." But this was only one of the many trials and difficulties which beset her path.

A few days after this, Grace was astonished by seeing the spare room in a state of preparation. On asking Anna what she was about, she answered she had received orders to get it ready.

That evening, just after tea, a carriage drove up with luggage. All the children gathered to the window to look and guess who it was. "Judith, Judith!" they exclaimed to one another. Grace looked up quickly, but her eyes dropped again directly, for she saw her father bowing and smiling—a rare sight—while he helped a stranger to alight, and gave orders for the boxes to be untied. A sharp voice sounded through the hall—sharp and hard—one of those peculiarly unpleasing voices which tell so much. They passed on to the drawing room. Grace's heart sank low. She felt it was the threatened governess.

CHAPTER IX.

Mrs. Jessop—for the lady selected by Mr. Bracy as governess, was a widow—was a great contrast to Grace. So Grace herself saw and reflected. She had an exuberance of spirits and apparent good humour. Words flowed rapidly with her. Everything was delightful, lovely, beautiful. It was surprising how wide her range of sympathy was. She could entirely enter into the aspirations and dreams of a genius such as Mr. Bracy. She could mourn with and for him in his lonely lot, (for was she not a fellow-sufferer?) while she could sympathise with Robert's gay temper and love of society. She “doted” on children, and followed Grace to her room, to assure her she felt for her “gentle” appearance “unbounded admiration.”

“That quiet languor becomes you,” she said. “It is so very interesting! But now I am here, you must give all the work, all the labour to me. I am used to it. You may sit still and amuse yourself. I will work.”

At first Grace was obliged to her for her friendly offers of help, and though she could

not get over her first impression, she tried hard to do so, and not be prejudiced or uncharitable. She tried to make the home pleasant for the stranger; but ere long, even Grace saw that the "stranger" would do that for herself, and Grace had very soon to rally her presence of mind and courage, or she found that not only the schoolroom duties would be taken from her, but every other. Once when she chanced to be late of a morning, only five minutes, she found Mrs. Jessop seated at the head of the table, pouring out the tea, and nodding good-humouredly at Grace, but not offering to give it up to her.

Mrs. Jessop was always at hand—always in the way to do a "good-natured action," as she called it. Ere a fortnight had passed, she was mending Mr. Bracy's gloves, filing his papers, even arranging his instruments—a thing Grace had never dared to do. She learnt to brew Mr. Bracy's toddy better than he did himself. Grace would never have ventured to offer her services, and looked on surprised and regretful. Yet, though Grace felt that this "stranger" had quickly stepped into her own rightful place, and would probably do so still more, she tried not to be sore or jealous. If she made her

father more comfortable, it would be good for all. It was a pleasure to see him satisfied, and if her own lack of agreeable qualities had caused her to fail so miserably in every way, this was but a just retribution and natural consequence.

So Grace sighed a little, but strove hard not to see things with a jealous eye. Now that the task of teaching was taken from her, she had more leisure to devote to the housekeeping, and she earnestly hoped to give greater satisfaction in this respect. She had great notions of notability, though her own mother had not been a practical example. But it was "in the family," as they said, and Grace studied with new vigour an old receipt-book of her mother's, and set about making delicate cakes and puddings, or preserving fruit.

It was a new interest, and one she liked. The cook had lived long there, and was a good kind old body, not at all awful to Grace, and very glad to encourage her young missis to "be handy, hoping it would be better for her, than so much poking over books and bills."

Grace began to look brisker, and feel lighter at heart; perhaps happier days were at hand. Her old friend Mr. Carlton expressed himself as pleased with what she told him, and with

her improved appearance. Grace hesitated and faltered as she said how she wished she might be allowed to attend the school again. Now she had so much more time too she But the Vicar interrupted her kindly, but gravely, saying, he was sure it would displease her father. She must be content with home work and interests, he said. Then he spoke of his intention of going to a milder climate for the winter, much against his wish, but doctors gave him little hope of life without it. A friend of his was to take his place in his absence. This was sad tidings—for though of late Grace had seen but little of him except at Church, she felt she had a good and wise friend and adviser in her clergyman always within call.

But Grace would not give way to sorrow or sadness. This new gleam of light and hope, had given her strength. She was thankful for the improvement, and anxious to make the most of it. As it was, grave cares hovered over the household. Besides never hearing of poor reckless Judith, Robert was constantly exciting his father's anger very justly, and teasing his sisters very selfishly. He had not repaid his debt, and Grace was growing very nervous as the day drew near, when she showed up her

accounts and received the month's pay. She entreated him if he really could not repay it, to explain it to his father, at which he only joked and made a grimace, or tried to work on her through flattery, praising her up as "so good a sister," and so on. She knew how much this was worth however, and assured him, if he would not speak himself, she should tell the simple truth.

The days passed away, and still Robert said he could not repay the money.

"What am I to do then?" Grace said.

"As you like! If there's a row I shall cut and run. I hate the office. I want to go to Australia. Old Bond has heard from his son, who says that John and Harry are getting on like a ship on fire! That's the go! I wish I could get out there!"

At one moment Grace had a passing thought of asking Mrs. Jessop's advice; perhaps even she would kindly advance the money, till Robert could pay her? Grace knew she had money; but something made her shrink from and dislike doing this. Better trust her own father, and not have unnecessary concealment. So she inserted in her account book, "Advanced to Robert £2;" and with a beating heart laid the

various books on her father's table, till he should be at leisure to overlook them.

Mr. Bracy was busy that day about a new threshing machine, invented by himself. The books were not touched when Grace anxiously looked in after dinner. It was very fine without, and she had leisure time. Knowing Mrs. Jessop to be looking on in the barn, Grace thought she might propose walking with her little sisters, who since the arrival of Mrs. Jessop had been much divided from her. Now her heart yearned towards them. Her own sisters—the little ones recommended to her love and care by her mother! She had proved a poor teacher and elder sister, but she "might still retain a hold on their hearts, still here a little, and there a little," strive to teach them God's ways. So she went to propose a walk to a certain favourite meadow where some fine iris grew.

The children seemed pleased at first, and Lydia slid her hand into Grace's, with a timid and frightened look. Esther said something about Mrs. Jessop not liking them to be with Grace, but evidently the gathering the flowers, and the walk was a pleasure desired, and she consented to go and ask leave.

"Have you been out before to-day?" Grace asked Lydia, thinking her paler even than common.

The child coloured up, but did not answer.

"We're not to tell," put in the younger one, Mary. "If we tell you things, we shall be locked up in the dark, like Lydia was."

Before Grace had thought what to say in answer to this, and while she became more and more certain that poor Lydia was very unhappy and afraid, Esther came back. She was the one, the most like Judith, and just now a very daring expression blended with curiosity, shone in her fine eyes, making Grace recall old scenes.

"No! on no account. Mrs. Jessop's going to take us herself," she added, speaking to Mary.

"Very well," Grace said, "I am sorry, but it can't be helped. You will like it as well I dare say."

As she was going, Lydia clung to her tightly, and Grace stooped to kiss her for this proof of liking, but Mrs. Jessop's voice was heard shrill and sharp, and Lydia suddenly let go her sister's hand, and ran to a further corner. Grace escaped up stairs without meeting the governess. As she sat in her own room pondering over Lydia's too evident signs of fear, she saw

Mrs Jessop pass out in the garden, followed by three of the children. Lydia was not there.

Without thought, Grace hastened to the schoolroom, but the child was not there. She then intended asking Anna about her, but on her way was stopped by her father's voice. It was Grace's turn to feel frightened now. She turned red and pale alternately, for she well knew the dreaded words in the account book had been observed, and she had now to bear the brunt of another's fault.

Mr. Bracy was very angry indeed. But it was in a new manner. He did not scold or talk in his usual violent way. When he heard her hesitating, but truthful account, in which she strove to plead for Robert, he told her in a cold, severe tone, that she by her own want of upright principle, was the cause of leading her brother and sister astray. He had borne with her long enough; but there must be an end to all things. Now, he requested her—and his assumed cold and polite manner, alarmed her even more than the old way—"to bring at once, all the keys and all the books. Henceforth he should place the management of the house in abler hands."

Seeing her about to speak, he desired her to say nothing, for according to the way she bore

this well-merited punishment, would depend her future treatment. Then, as if he had controlled himself as long as he could, some of the old smothered dislike burst out, and with a look but too familiar to her, he bade her begone. She need not come back with the keys ; she was to give them to Anna to bring.

It added not a little to the bitterness of this blow, to feel, though she would not see, the sneer of triumph on this woman's face, as Grace gave her the keys and books wrapped in a newspaper. This done, she closed her door, and gave way to bitter weeping. "O, Robert, Robert, this is your doing!"

"And where is Miss Grace?" inquired Mrs. Jessop, as the party were about sitting down to supper.

"I am sorry—grieved," said the widow, looking at Mr. Bracy; "but one must expect a little—, perhaps."

"Expect nothing but sullen, fretful temper, as I told you," he said, shortly.

"Ah, well! but first impressions are so right. I saw it at once on the poor girl's face, though I have blindfolded myself, I am sure, and picked out all her better points."

"There are none to pick that I ever saw.

But what's this?—veal pie. Shall I help you?" And Mr. Bracy was engrossed with his meal.

Robert did not escape. His father and he had high words, in which the son declared his resolution to leave the office and the country; and his father said he might do so if he liked, but would get never a farthing from him if he did.

The next day was Sunday—a quiet, sunny, beautiful, summer Sunday. Every one who could, went into the fields or the woods, or walked by the river side that evening; working men and their little children, mothers and grown up daughters. They might be seen on that evening in every pleasant place, resting.

But some cared not to avail themselves of this offered rest. At Cross Farm, Mr. Bracy worked with frowning brows over his calculations. The Church bells did not call him to Church. Only when dinner was announced did he don his coat and go down. Grave and pre-occupied, he did not notice Grace's pale, heavy looks, as she timidly hesitated, appealing silently to him, doubtful if she might even retain her seat at the head of the table.

"I had better carve that goose, Gracey, dear,"

Mrs. Jessop said, seating herself meanwhile; while Grace, with drooping eyes and tightly-clasped hands, sank into the next chair. Neither did the father notice the vacant place till the meal was over. Then, looking up, he said, "Where is Robert?"

There was no answer, and Mr. Bracy looked at Mrs. Jessop.

She shook her head, and said, "she didn't know: he was always irregular, wasn't he?"

"He went out half-an-hour ago," the maid said, pertly, "and told me to have his boots wiped over before this evening."

No more passed; but when most of the family were out, either at Church or taking a walk (Mr. Bracy had gone to see a distant field), Robert came back with a fly, and hastily putting up a box of things, he drove off. Coming out of Church, Grace saw this fly driving very fast. She looked up, and recognised her brother's hat as he waved it at her, and she understood then that he had fulfilled his rash threat,—that another was gone! There was only herself now of the "first set," as they used to term themselves, to explain the interregnum which divided them from the younger ones.

Grace could not help pitying her father.

"He doesn't now, but one day he surely will feel lonely and deserted! What is it which drives them each and all away so? Are other homes, other large families like our's? If so, what a wretched, sad place this world is!"

And when she was again in her own little room, Grace placed her mother's Bible on the window-ledge, and amid the low and pleasant murmur of summer night sounds, the scent of blossoms, and the refreshing, cool air, she read with a full heart those wonderful words, speaking of that strange life to come, "where the wicked cease from troubling, and the weary are at rest: where there is no more sorrow nor pain: where there is love and peace for evermore."

Darkness stole gently over all; voices were hushed; only a buzzing sphinx moth and a subdued, distant whisper of insects was heard. Grace's face was on her hands, and they were clasped on the book. Her thoughts had wandered on far; she had lost the guiding rein, and now they galloped far and wide, over old paths. Not only that other life was before her, but, while seeking the road which led to it, she had once again allowed fancy and imagination to draw pictures of wayside scenes. Again Grace

fancied herself a heroine, with her armour buckled on, in company with the good and the great ; self-devoted, ardent, brave. She saw the noble Christian maidens who in old times consented to die a martyr's death, rather than lose the martyr's promised crown. She thought of S. Cecilia, and many another whose history she knew by heart. She remembered, too, the story of that holy woman who loved prayer and meditation, but who as wife and mother had her time fully occupied ; who, called away from domestic cares many, many times from reading the Scriptures, and always going with sweet patience, when she returned, found her psalm in beautiful golden letters,—showing the blessing of duty fulfilled, which, like a key, opened unto her the treasures of God's Word. On and on Grace travelled in fancy, as she had done so often before, though not of late : nursing the sick, teaching the heathen, even visiting among the wretched and the poor daily, as Aunt Betsy did ; dressing poorly, living hard, to be able to give to others ;—all this filled Grace's heart and mind with eager desire, till, in her earnestness, she involuntarily spoke aloud.

“ How beautiful ! how happy ! But I—my lot is cast in such a different place ! All is so

low, so sordid, so mean; it can't be right! There must be some work for a willing heart. Where is it, I wonder? Oh, if I could but find it!"

A slight sound—a sense of the presence of some one, made her sit up and look round. In the shadow she descried a figure. She rose up quickly, blushing, though in the dark.

"Is that you, Grace?" said Mrs. Jessop, her sharp voice falling strangely on that sweet stillness, and startling Grace.

"I fancied I heard a voice. Whom are you speaking to?"

"To no one—to myself, I believe," Grace said, hesitatingly and shyly.

"Nonsense! don't try to humbug me! I know better, child!" and she laughed. "Your father has begged me to look after the house, including yourself: he doesn't seem to consider you particularly steady. Come, no nonsense! Who is it?"

"Indeed, I don't understand you, Mrs. Jessop," Grace said, coolly. "Did my father desire you to spy—to watch in my own room?"

"He told me—asked me, I should say, to oblige him by taking the part of head of this establishment: I take my own measures for

this end. Once for all, let us understand one another. You are very meek, but smooth water is ever deep." Again she laughed, and Grace wondered. "Now, I am noisy, like a cataract ; every one may see and know me at once—all above-board : that's the charm of my character, as my late husband used to say. I mean to be kind towards you, and even stand up for you ; but mind, I expect you to trust to me. So—do you see ?—don't be telling me you're talking to yourself, when I heard you with my own ears asking somebody a question. Girls will have their followers. Bless you ! I had my share, and more than my share. Now, who is it, my quiet, meek, genteel little Grace ? pious as a graven image, strict as a quaker : whom is she talking to this summer night, eh, ducky ? Out with it!"

As she chucked Grace under the chin, and in her boisterous fashion coaxed her, squeezing her and rattling her numerous chains and rings, Grace—whose tastes, whose very instincts were so opposite—could not repress a slight shudder ; and she tried to draw herself from Mrs. Jessop's arms.

"There ! sitting by the open window has made you shiver ! But it has, though ! Come,

no nonsense, my pet lambkin ; I see, you and I will be excellent allies, sworn friends. You won't repent making a friend of me, see if you do ! I could tell you—but mum. However, I'll do something for you yet ! We must 'manage' a certain person : eh, ducky ? Come, I shall make you some toddy ; it will do you good. You are cold-blooded, and want some heat in you. Come along ! " And she pulled Grace on with strong arms, which it was vain to resist.

As they went down she still talked. " How did you manage that wretched little brute ? I had to whip her to-night ! The dark closet won't do ; but the rod will answer. I can't abide that timorous, puling temper : it raises my hot blood ! But I shall whip it out of her yet ! "

" Who ? Of whom are you talking ? Not, surely not—poor Lydia ! poor Lydia ! mother's pet. God forbid ! " Grace exclaimed, in terror which astonished the complacent widow.

" Indeed, I did ! Don't excite yourself, now. But I mean to conquer that child, I do ! "

" Not a difficult task," Grace said. " Very little will cure her—make her sly, and a coward. Do be gentle, patient—— ! She was so long ill ; so much indulged ; O, poor Lydia ! What

would mother say, or think ! And this is owing to me ! ” These last words she did not utter aloud. But her strong disgust against the coarseness of this person was lost in her painful fear that, wholly misunderstanding the nature of this child, she would ruin her by coarse severity.

“ Don’t be afraid,” again laughed Mrs. Jessop. “ I’ve had experience ! I know ! She’s met her match now ! ”

Mr. Brady did not appear at supper. Mrs. Jessop and Grace were alone ; and as several glasses of the hot toddy disappeared, which Mrs. Jessop thought she was so good a hand at brewing, and recommended so highly though vainly to Grace, the widow grew kind and confidential, and Grace’s astonishment increased, till she was fairly lost in a puzzle, at the opposite and extraordinary qualities Mrs. Jessop displayed. She gave Grace a short sketch of her life, and it was such that Grace grew more and more unhappy at the idea of such a person taking her own poor mother’s place—of guiding and teaching the little girls. At last, Grace rose with a sudden and determined resolution to hear no more, and go away. She called the servant, the sneering Anna, and hardly knowing what to say, pointed in a frightened way to the parlour,

only saying, "Mrs. Jessop!" She hastened up stairs.

"Ay, ay," the maid answered. And then Grace heard her speaking sharply—even threateningly—and—surely she must be mistaken! But it sounded as if Mrs. Jessop was crying—begging for mercy—bribing the maid, not to tell something. Horrified, bewildered, Grace flew to her own room, and took care to lock it.

Thoughts, too bad to shape distinctly, far less to speak, hovered over her. Should she, could she give her father a hint; now, before it was too late? For his sake, and for the children's sake!

Grace sat up, watching and listening. She knew her father was still out. At last she heard him return. He spoke to Anna in the hall, and was coming up stairs. Grace timidly opened her door. The next moment she would have given the world not to have done so; but it was too late. Mr. Bracy saw her; stopped and asked what she was doing so late, watching him?

"May I speak to you one moment?"

"What now? Well! Come in, and make haste." He entered Grace's room as he spoke. In turning to close the door, Grace caught sight of a door at the end of the passage, a little open.

Something white was there. Mrs. Jessop's head peeped out and back again in a moment. Grace turned quickly to meet Anna's eyes as she came up stairs with the keys and the basket of silver spoons and forks. Anna smiled in a meaning way. She, too, saw Mrs. Jessop's head. She even shook her head a little at Grace, as if to give her warning.

"Well, why do you keep me waiting on your whims? What is this freak? Be quick!" said Mr. Bracy; and Grace, confused and alarmed, burst into tears. "Do forgive me!" she sobbed out desperately, seeing he was about to push past her, angry and annoyed. She put her hand on him to detain him. He flung it off. "But do you know—much—a great deal—about this lady—Mrs. Jessop, I mean?" she managed to say.—"Oh, if I could but make you understand me! If you could but have heard—have seen—Lydia—she will ruin! She—she—O, she talked so foolishly to-night, and—and—so many glasses of toddy, father!"

All came out in a jumble: she could scarcely detain him. At last, he fixed his eyes on her.

"Hang me, if I understand. Are you mad? O, I see! You and the widow have been drinking my share as well as your own of toddy! Pretty

doings ! This is the ‘pious’ Grace, too ! Go to bed, girl ; and to-morrow you’ll hear of this again ! Disgusting humbug ! These District Visitors !” And with an oath, and a loud “ Anna, see you that Miss Grace’s light is out,” he entered his own room.

“ As she has brewed, so she must drink,” was Anna’s observation to her fellow servant a week afterwards, when old cook was loudly lamenting over the hard fate of “ poor little Miss Grace.”

Mrs. Jessop had many curious qualities ; and though at first sight it might seem so, she was by no means a person easily read. Great affectation of bluntness, and a sort of easy, rough goodnature, hid a wary, intriguing spirit and a strong regard for her own interests. She was good tempered, in a way, while she was also cruel and despotic ; nor did she care how low she stooped to gain a point. She was clever and coarse, and passed for a handsome woman among some people.

Mrs. Jessop did not naturally like Grace. She came fully prepared to hate her, and fight her tooth and nail. But finding Grace meek and yielding, and already in the “ black books” with her father, all that was goodnatured in the

widow, sprang up in favour of Grace. Had Grace fallen a little more readily into believing Mrs. Jessop's flattery, and given her a little in return, while she gave so little trouble in being tenacious of her rights, Mrs. Jessop would have been kind to her. True, she began at once by trying to set the children against their sister's influence ; but Grace was not worth the trouble of fighting ; she threw down her arms so at once. Mrs. Jessop's success, hitherto, had been so much greater and quicker than she had expected, that she resolved not to be timid, but strike a bold blow at once. Truly she lost no time ! She had not only advised Robert to be firm and go from this country, but had actually been rash enough to invest some of her savings on this reckless youth. Secretly she had lent him money to take him to London. He expected there to hear of an employment which would frank him to Australia. If not, he could but work his way somehow. Once there, he thought all was right, as he had friends there besides his brother. After getting so formidable an obstacle well out of her path, Mrs. Jessop, somewhat flushed and excited with success, had tried to make way with Grace. How she succeeded has been seen. But although poor Grace's horrible

suspicion that too many glasses of toddy had affected the lady's head was true, it was not to that degree but that Mrs. Jessop was very soon quite aware of her own momentary carelessness. No sooner was she in her room than, after washing her face, she recalled Grace's frightened look, and suspected mischief. She therefore watched. She saw and understood Grace's appeal to her father, and Anna's meaning look. She did not much dread any thing poor Grace could say or do against her ; but from that moment her whole soul was turned against Grace with a deadly and bitter hatred.

There was no longer, after that night, a semblance of friendship or liking. Mrs. Jessop was haughty and cold ; entirely preventing a free intercourse between Grace and her sisters ; chiefly because she knew it gave Grace pain, for her power was too firmly established for that to be in danger, and often she would have been glad to depute the trouble of a lesson or a walk to Grace. But she must be kept "down, and broken in ;" and to thwart her in every thing, great or little, was the way. More and more Mrs. Jessop reigned supreme from cellar to garret, and more and more did Grace retire in silence, but in pain, to her own

room—"Still entirely her own," she had come to say with a thankful heart. "Should that ever be taken . . . but—no! she would not, must not, anticipate evils. She could not live if she did. The old cook deplored and stormed too; threatening to give warning! Even Anna seemed satisfied and amply revenged; and though in talking it over to cook, she had laid the blame of this open war on Miss Grace herself, for Mrs. Jessop had been inclined to be "comfortable" with her before she went telling of tales that night; still, Anna no longer tried Grace by her own rebellious insolence. She was even civil and attentive, and would have been more so, but that she saw Grace did not much like her and never encouraged her to talk or be familiar. Anna sometimes repeated to Grace the servants' resentment of any undue assumption of "Missis" airs on Mrs. Jessop's part; but she never drew any reply or remark from Grace. This was aggravating, and made her exclaim—

"How I do hate such close people! there she'll sit the live-long day, and better than half the night, reading, sewing, writing, thinking,—so mum and so stupid! Not a scrap of spirit about her! Bah! I'd sooner see a body get

into a passion ! But she looks very badly, don't she, now, cook ?"

" Ay ! and will look worse if this is to go on ! Mussy 'pon us ! things was bad enough in poor Missus' time ; 'twere always a doomed kind of go-wrong sort of set. And then to see, how money came for the asking, as you may say. Such luck ! and they was set up for gentlefolks at once ; not but the master always was, or might have been, only he didn't hold by it at all ! And then poor Judith, and her handsome face ; where be she now, poor soul, I wonder ! And John, with his dark, clever eye ; but I always say he was the best o' em—he and Grace. Ay, Grace ! for all yer sneers ! I do say and uphold 'mong ye all, that Grace was as good and dutiful a little maid as ever lived !—a right-down, well-spoken, genteel little body ; and 'tis a sin for just to see the spirit of the girl broken down so ! Better she was dead this minute ! Ah, poor little lamb, if you had put up with spanking Harry, you'd have laid softer now I do believe ! But there ! All's for the best some day !"

Old cook's not very intelligible ejaculations ended in her taking a resolution which she very soon carried into execution. Cook came from

Bracy's native town ; her "folks," as she called them, lived there now, and saw the Banks' family pretty often. So, in course of time, an oddly spelt, curiously worded letter, found its way from Cross Farm kitchen to Mrs. Thomas White, laundress, Mill Street.

And when Mrs. T. White next found time for a gossip with her friends, she carried this letter from her sister with her ; and as in the multitude of counsellors there is safety, she prudently took advice. The matronly heads agreed it would be kind to give Miss Cissy Banks—poor Mrs. Bracy's maiden and only surviving sister—hints as to what was going on in her brother-in-law's house.

"She may do as she likes when she knows," the advisers sagely remarked ; "but she ought to know."

"Bless my soul ! you have surprised me, Mrs. White!" was Miss Cissy Banks' exclamation, when she finished the letter, which Mrs. White carried straight and at once to her ; and with tears in her eyes Cissy sighed and repeated, "Bless me ! oh, dear ! oh, dear ! Poor dear Lydia was very self-willed that once ! She would have Bracy, though we all warned her he was a genius, and sure to make an indifferent

husband. Besides, by birth he was a gentleman, and—well, I am old-fashioned, Mrs. White, and I think it is wiser and happier to keep in one's own station ; but that's neither here nor there. Bless me ! Grace writes me a very pretty and proper letter now and then, about once a year or so ; but she never hinted all this. What can be done, I wonder ? I must ask my brother. Hugh is a wise man, of common, sound sense. Thank goodness ! there never was any genius in our family ; and I don't hear there's any sign of it in poor Lydia's children. Mrs. Jessop—is that the name ? Why, Mrs. White, surely that is the very woman who made such a fuss at Steel and Barker's ! Ah, now I think of it, it must be the same ; a shocking person ! Oh, my poor dear Lydia's blessed children ! Well, well, Hugh is a man of common sense ! ”

The consequence of all this was—on second thoughts, it had better be deferred till the next chapter.

CHAPTER X.

SUMMER seemed to have passed away suddenly. Several days' rain and wind hurried the already touched leaves to their end. The grass-plot was strewn with them, bright even now, and giving a warm tint to the earth. Dahlias nodded their proud heads and fell, ruthlessly snapped off. Chrysanthemums were "looking up" in all the pride of bud and leaf, ready to come out and shine as autumn beauties, when the present storm should cease. Nearly all the later harvest was saved, but not quite. For such as remained unstacked, there was grave consultation and anxious fears.

"It has stopped raining," Grace thought to herself, as she looked out wistfully at the damage done to the garden. "I should like to go to the wood and gather some moss for my plants."

As she doubted whether she might so far venture without risk of that kind of notice she had learned to dread and shrink from so much, that by degrees she gave up everything that might possibly provoke it, Grace thought she

beard wheels in the front ; but as her window did not look out that way, she only waited ; and meanwhile she watched the capricious, fitful dance of the yellow and brown leaves, as they swept up with sudden violence, and then floated on, pitching one here and another there, while one fresh from its twig occasionally sailed down, and alighted as if on purpose by its side. Grace smiled, remembering a childish fancy of her own about these autumn leaves, when it was no difficult matter to believe them gifted with life and thought, and she had imagined them complaining to each other of their fall.

“ Miss Grace ! please, miss, there’s a lady come in a fly ; and she says she is come to see Miss Grace Bracy, and no one else ; and she wouldn’t go into the drawing-room, but told me to find you and tell you.”

“ Who is it, Anna ?”

“ I’m sure I don’t know ; didn’t say her name. Queer kind of body, I doubt,” said Anna, in a pet.

Grace came out on the stairs, and took a peep at the figure standing in the hall beside a large, old-fashioned carpet-bag. She knew her at once, and with a feeling of joy, long a stranger,

she leapt down stairs, clearing two or three at a bound.

"Oh, Aunt Cissy! Fancy your coming! Did you write? does father know?"

"Indeed I did not," said the aunt, after kissing Grace; "I thought I might reckon on a welcome in my poor sister's own house; at all events from you, my dear girl. I had my own reasons for undertaking such a journey, and in such weather too; and my brother Hugh—he too advised my coming at once. So I took just a day to arrange my affairs, packed up, just a change, and ordered a steady fly from the inn. Ten miles, they call it; but, my dear, I had forgotten the hills. I felt much alarmed; but the driver was very civil, and assured me his horse was very strong. So—here I am. Will you order some little refreshment for the man and his horse? At least, it strikes me it would be but hospitable, eh?"

Grace was running to the kitchen to give the order, when she remembered, that any order from her was resented as interference. With a blank face, she therefore spoke to Anna, begging her to speak to Mrs. Jessop about it.

"She's out," Anna answered in her blunt way. "Cook can manage. Sharp as some

folks be, cook can find a mouthful for a friend ; and bless you, she wasn't long in speaking neither. Seems they be acquaintance."

" Yes, indeed," put in Aunt Cissy, " cook is one of our town ; but now, my dear, if you think proper, I shall be happy to take off my bonnet and shawl. I am not used to travelling ; I am a very stay-at-home person."

Grace could scarcely refrain from smiling at the long journey this ten miles' drive seemed to be to this old aunt. She answered cheerfully,

" You are indeed. You haven't been to see us for—how long is it, Aunt Cissy ?"

" I don't know indeed, my dear. So this is Cross Farm ? Well, and a very nice and proper dwelling it appears to be."

And the old lady looked out of window, and then round the room, with a quiet but eager scrutiny.

Finding that Mr. Bracy and Mrs. Jessop were out, Miss Banks wished to see the house. She was much pleased with everything, and amused her niece very much by her curiosity and awe together, about Mr. Bracy's experiment room. It was locked as usual, and Grace said her father allowed no one to enter. Miss Banks accordingly stooped to try and gain a

peep through the key hole. When she drew back it was with a long sigh. "I don't see any flames or any machines." And she explained afterwards, that very strange stories of Mr. Bracy's doings had got about. It was useless for Grace to try and tell here about the electric machine—Aunt Cissy could not understand. She only knew that her poor dear departed sister Lydia, had once told her with tears, of her husband's ways, and said it would end in bringing them all to destruction, and although there could not be found a more sensible and clever man than her brother Hugh, he never meddled with such outlandish affairs.

"And now my dear, do you guess the reason of my visit?" Aunt Cissy said, after resting for a little in Grace's own room.

"Was it not to see us?"

"Yes, but something more too! Grace, my dear, you look like a sensible girl; indeed, I never heard that any of you had any of your father's genius . . ."

"No, not one," Grace said sadly.

"God be thanked!" exclaimed the aunt. "You are old enough now to know what is what. Now you see, we Banks don't forget your poor mother, nor do we wish to forsake

her children ; but we have always been in trade, and our fathers and grandfathers before us. We like it, we are even proud of it, and had rather keep in our own proper place, than push ourselves out of it . . . A'hem . . . well, I was going to observe, that this is by no means a common feeling. On the contrary, people get ashamed of their own position, and try to leave it, and be called gentry. I have observed no good ever follow this. Not that I mean to blame your father in that respect. He came of an old country family I know, and if he in his hot-headed youth, chose to despise it, there came a day when he desired it again. He has prospered too ; and then we heard of your sister, what a gay, grand lady she was. And so we all agreed, a line was drawn, not of our doing, and Hugh and Sarah not wishing discentent and envy to fall on their family, we settled to keep aloof, and not meddle till such times as any of you might need us.

“ My dear,” she resumed after a long pause, “ It strikes me and Hugh too, that the time is come. We hear that you lead a forlorn life in this house, and that misfortune and trouble have divided your family. We have heard too of—of . . . a certain person—eh, you under-

stand?" she said lowering her voice and nodding her head. "I see you do. In fact we know something of her, more than she would wish perhaps. And we have heard very creditable accounts of you and your quiet conduct, and so Hugh, your uncle and his wife, your aunt, and I may say, all their children, said, 'Now, Aunt Cissy, this is one of your own bits of work. You must go and make yourself very agreeable, and get Mr. Bracy's consent for Grace to come and visit us.' So, here I am, and if you consent, I intend to try what I can do. Eh? what do you say? You're not too proud to visit your mother's folks, though they are not 'gentry?' "

"O Aunt Cissy, it would be too good. I must not think of it. I should like it better than any other thing. Do you think he will let me go? Perhaps he will, for I am no use now—none."

And Grace's tears began to flow a little, as she thought of the being one of a happy family party, instead of the lonely, dull life she had lately led.

Aunt Cissy found a pleased listener, to her endless descriptions of Hugh's children and all their virtues. The simple account she gave of

their lives, seemed to Grace like one of her own dreams, and she quite dreaded to hear the sounds of preparation for tea, so wrapt was she in Aunt Cissy's wonderful stories.

" You see, having six daughters, Hugh and his wife thought it very hard to deny this one, if her wish was so very strong. They might spare her, as they said, for closer devotion to God's work. It was clear, some one must rise up and do it. So after a long proving time, and a trial as a visitor, Lucy was allowed to become one of the Sisters. She comes home always once or twice a year, and is so happy, and we all go and see her. Dear girl, she is so good, and brings a blessing on us all I think."

" How I should like to see the place!" Grace sighed out.

" And so you shall, my dear. You asked if the rules were strict. Pretty well. They must be so, of course; but it all comes easy, Lucy says. First she found the dress odd, rather. Now she likes it, and would not change for anything. It is very simple, and all black and grey, with a close crimped white cap; and out of doors, a cloak and hood, and a large bonnet and veil. They do a great deal of good, especially among the rude, rough people in the shipping yards.

Every where they may be seen, wherever there is distress or sickness, and never do they meet with any insult or rude behaviour. The Clergyman but hark! Is that your father's voice?"

It was, and Grace's flushed face soon faded into its usual paleness, while the aunt carefully pinned on, a funny, elaborate cap of old-fashioned lace and white love-ribbon, in which she desired to please her formidable brother-in-law. She believed that great tact and skill would be required to gain her point, but she nodded encouragement and hope to Grace as she went down stairs, and Grace felt how very nice it was to touch some one so kind and loving.

If Grace had been less anxious, she must have been amused at Aunt Cissy's efforts to please, mingled with her natural honest sincerity, and disapproval of Mrs. Jessop. The latter was patronising and rather contemptuous, and Mr. Bracy more gracious in his reception of his wife's sister, than might be expected. After tea, the four little ones were asked for, and appeared with Mrs. Jessop to look red and shy, or amused and rather pert, at this, to them, new aunt.

Grace bowed lower over her work, as she heard her ask Mr. Bracy to grant her five minutes' talk, and saw them leave the room together. Her heart beat fast. If he should say no! And yet till an hour or two ago, such a prospect had never been imagined. She never dreamt of visiting her mother's relations, though she had sometimes wished to know the young cousins, in spite of Judith's jokes and sneers about them. Then this Sisters' Home, her own first cousin being one of them, was what she had scarcely even dreamt of. Who knows how fast or how far her thoughts had gone in it when she was roused again to real, present life, and its hopes and fears, by hearing her father ask Mrs. Jessop to come to him. What could that be for? Must her leave be obtained even for Grace to leave the house? And very quickly fell all the bright fancies of a moment before. Mrs. Jessop was so determined to punish and oppose her, that if she had a word to say, it must be a refusal. It was very hard—very. Happy, happy cousins, who from Aunt Cissy's account had always had so happy and peaceful a home! . . .

"Well, what are you looking so dismal for?" inquired Mrs. Jessop sharply, as she stood in

front of Grace. "A good shaking would certainly do you good! 'Tis enough to infect one with your own dark spirit I declare; and I am sure the house will seem brighter when you are away. Your papa has been consulting me about your paying a visit to your mother's family. There is, of course, much to be said against it. Yet, I have advised it. One thing is, as long as you mope and shut up here, you can't have a chance of marrying, and there you will see . . ."

"That would be my last reason for wishing to go. I do not think of marriage," Grace said.

"Nonsense. If you don't, you ought to, for your father's sake. It is hard on him to keep you always—very! I told him, I insinuated just now, that it is high time for you to be thinking of settling, and I believe there are one or two young cousins, and your uncle is thriving in his trade."

"Please don't talk so, or I never shall go there. I couldn't!"

"It is doubly incumbent on you," Mrs. Jessop went on, not heeding her interruption, "to marry respectably after Judith's downfall—her sad folly!"

"Why, have you heard? Do you know anything? Is it possible that she has written—

that father has heard and not told me?" Grace exclaimed.

"This much I knew before I came here. All the world knows that she is living with the gay baronet. But, no, she has not written that I know of. As yet she has had no need, I suppose. But she is mistaken, if she thinks, when her hour comes, as it will, that her disobedience will be forgotten or forgiven. Your father expresses himself firmly and fairly. He says that those of his children, who have chosen to set up their own opinions, and defy his authority, are no longer his to care for. So take you care, Grace! For quiet as you seem, I shouldn't wonder, if there was a hitch yet, which you will come to breaking! You have your warning at all events. And now if you go to these relations, mind that your father has his own ideas."

Grace sighed, but made no attempt at an answer. Mr. Bracy and Miss Banks joined them, and their going on the morrow was discussed and settled.

While Aunt Cissy prosed on in her low and monotonous voice, her crossed hands folded on her lap in their huge armour of gloves, her white muslin neckerchief so firmly folded on her bosom and confined with a round gold pin,

her wonderful shaped cap, Grace almost believed she was dreaming, for Aunt Cissy spoke of things altogether new to her as facts of real life. Very simple and quaint was the old lady's manner of talking of her brother's family and concerns. The eldest girl was engaged to be married, she said, to a young sea-faring man, now on a voyage to the West Indies; one of her nephews was to be a sailor too. She spoke of the twin babies, the glory of the house, of schools for the neglected sailors' children, even for the men themselves, in which she, and her nieces, and her brothers, all worked and taught; and she spoke of the "Home"—how it had first been thought of and brought about—of the unkind distrust and opposition it had met, but also, and more, of the hearty good will and sympathy, and the undoubted fruits, already apparent.

Mrs. Jessop listened, and asked a question, or uttered an exclamation, suppressing several yawns, by the way. Mr. Bracy read his book, and only showed that he heard a word, by a sneer, or a half-uttered pshaw! Grace drank in each word, and seemed as if in a new world. When she went to bed, she thought it was too happy to be true, and when she awoke, it was with a keen sense of hope and expectation, very

new to her and very sweet. Her only regret, was the not having time to call and see the Vicar and Aunt Betsy, but to the latter she would write. As it chanced, they passed Mr. Carlton, and Grace checked the driver, feeling it was to be a real good-bye. Before she returned, would he not be gone? He was pleased at her prospects of happiness, and bade her mention his name to the Lady who presided at the Home, a particular friend of his own, he said.

It was a cordial, earnest farewell. She was one of his flock, for whose soul he must render some account, and from circumstances, and her own nature, the bond had been peculiarly near between them. But he was going. It remained only now for her to gather up all the wise and kind teaching he had ever given. If any perplexity or trouble as she had before known, was prepared for her in the next six months, he would not be near to guide or to help. Grace thought of this, and it saddened her for the first part of her drive. But her aunt's remarks, and her own admiration of the country, soon claimed all her attention. At last, there was a town and a church steeple seen in the distance. That was Fordbridge, and then the long bridge came in view, and the masts and the numerous

boats and larger vessels, all new to Grace, who had never left her home for even this distance, since she could remember.

"Do you live alone?" she asked, all at once wondering if she was going to Uncle Hugh's house or not.

"Yes, I have a small place of my own. It is best, though I should be welcome with them. My maid, my bird, my cat and dog, and myself. And you are my guest at first: not long, I dare say. They'll be sure to claim you. But it is opposite their house. We are always together. See, I knew they would be looking out," and she pointed to a large house, with a raised verandah, on which stood two or three people, waving handkerchiefs.

A grave man with a broad white beaver hat, came out, and crossing the round, pebble-paved street, stood to open the carriage door. Aunt Cissy said, "How do you do, Hugh; here is Grace." And she found herself lifted out, looked at gravely, and kissed deliberately by him. He had a brown, wrinkled face, and was oddly dressed. He said "God bless you, my niece. You are rather like your mother," and then gave his attention to his sister, whose words came faster, so much she had to tell and

to ask, and so strange and unusual was a visit from home to her. One would have thought she had returned from a voyage to America, by the welcome and the care bestowed by the old servant, a sort of ditto—only some ten years younger—of Aunt Cissy herself. And before Grace had time to look round her, there was quite a crowd as it seemed, such a hugging, and talking, and kissing, from various cousins, of different ages, who had run across, without bonnets, to welcome the guest.

It struck Grace as very odd that all this warm-hearted welcome should have been so long neglected; that so many kind hearts had always lived only ten miles away!

CHAPTER XI.

GRACE was led away by her cousin Cecilia to see her room and take off her things. When alone together the girls were shy and strange, casting side glances of curiosity and observation, and skirting the merest commonplace topics with great formality.

When they returned to the parlour, Aunt Cissy was full of her visit and her success. That it was a step of grave importance she believed, and her hearers too. The mother, "Aunt Sarah," smiled graciously, and expressed her gladness at the success, and hoped Grace would soon look stronger, and would not be bored by so many noisy cousins.

She insisted on dividing parties for the first evening, and caused some disappointment by carrying off all but two. To-morrow, Aunt Cissy and Grace were to come to them; and, if fine, they were to go out in a boat; since Uncle Hugh had business to transact with a brig which lay at anchor some way down the river.

Grace amused them by saying she had never been in a boat, or seen a ship. There was therefore plenty to see and do; for Fordbridge was a brisk trading port, and famous for building ships of a certain class and tonnage. A steamer went from thence to America every month, another to Ireland. It was quite in the world; and when Grace went to her uncle's house, which looked out at the back on the river and quay, she thought it a very gay and amusing scene, and that she should never tire of watching the motion of the little cutters, or

the splash of the oars. The sailors' songs, too, and the rattle of the anchor chain struck her; whilst the beauty of the broad river and its opposite shore was also new and full of interest.

Nothing could be more different than the life here and at her own home. Here there was so much stir; every one so busy and so bright too. Her uncle was a punctual, energetic man of business, and suffered no carelessness or neglect around him. A strict rule pervaded the household, mingled with much comfort, enjoyment, and peace. Nothing approaching extravagance or show, but plenty for all, and down to the youngest, each one was expected to do his duty, and had some regular and defined share of work. The eldest son was his father's partner; the second was now in London at a first-rate chemist's, having a strong liking for that pursuit; the third boy, yet at school, was to be a sailor, and soon won Grace's heart by his merry ways.

The eldest daughter, who was second in the list, was called Christian; pretty, small, and a little prim, but very gentle, and yet fervent rather than warm in manner. She was to marry Captain Cartwright, when he returned from this voyage. She wore some curious bracelets of foreign berries, and had many a rare and curious

treasure brought by her lover from far-off lands. Next to her came William. Then Lydia, a noisy, chattering, high-spirited girl, always being rebuked in a mild way for heedlessness, but never out of temper. She was not pretty at all, but had an agreeable countenance ; and might have looked nicer, if she had dressed better. But she was rather fond of finery, which was not approved in the family ; and between the somewhat rigid taste of her father and mother, and her own vain attempts at being in the fashion, it was a failure.

Next to her was Lucy, the one who lived at the Home, evidently Aunt Cissy's pet and darling. Then came the chemist, Harvey ; and next to him was a nice-looking, blue-eyed maiden, the one who had been so shy with Grace on her first arrival, but who since always quietly got by her side, and watched to anticipate her wishes, which she was quick to read. But she was very silent, and sometimes a little sad, or seemed so, in comparison to the rest. Her name was Cecilia, but she had not got the abbreviation which had been given to her aunt ; and the only attempt at it was in one of her father's attempts at being jocose,—an attempt very ludicrous, and apt to remind one of the

saying of the cow in a china shop. He would stroke his daughter's golden hair, and call her "Celia."

Grace fancied she was the one who got most smiles and caresses; and Grace herself, if she had a preference in these early days, thought it must be for Cecilia.

The schoolboy Patrick was followed by another sister Jane, and then came the twins, now just five years old. Their names were Prudence and Patience; and they were so pretty and so coy in their very plain, but exquisitely clean frocks and pinafores, that Grace wished she could draw well enough to put them in a picture, somewhat different from one which hung over the chimney piece, intending to represent them, hand in hand; a specimen of painting by a town amateur performer, of which Mr. Banks was rather proud.

Sometimes Grace was somewhat perplexed what to say in this way, for her own father's taste was extraordinarily good in all matters of art, and her own natural taste refined; whereas it did not seem indigenous to the Banks' family, and Uncle Hugh especially was rather fond of collecting curiosities—certainly more curious than beautiful—and he was in the habit of holding forth on them, and giving his judgment on

painting, &c., with great unction and a quiet self-trust, accustomed to take the lead and pass judgment, from the merits of a design for a Church window to a figure-head for a ship, or from the town politics to matters of Church and State.

He was keen, sensible, and reflecting, and had made his own way to a very creditable position as a townsman and successful tradesman. He was good to the poor, and kind and upright in his dealings with every one. He had always taken his place in the town government as alderman and even mayor.

He had been churchwarden for years, and in a quiet way believed he was a great support to the Clergyman. Fortunately, he had served his apprenticeship as a young man under a wise ruler; but the old Rector was gone, and the successor was more good and well-intentioned than discreet. Things had not gone so smoothly of late, and it was really necessary for the churchwarden to be staunch, and oppose the factious opposition which arose. Mr. Banks shone in these difficult times, and having a good deal of weight and influence among the merchants and men of his own standing, he had it in his power to do a good deal. All his old

Cissy said over and over again, that when she married Bracy, she was a pretty, happy girl that any man might have been proud to win for his wife; and here her voice became harsher, and Grace had been glad to turn the subject; for greatly as she had suffered from them, she always winced at any mention of her father's faults. She liked to go the walks, where Aunt Cissy told her her mother went. She liked to see and touch the bed, still her aunt's own, which the two sisters had always shared. Every little remembrance and association of her mother—every trace of her in her maiden life—was dear to Grace; and tears often came in her own quiet room, when she thought how complete had been the estrangement that her marriage had caused. How much a small portion of the kindness of her own people would have soothed and softened her mother's troubled lot! and the cause of all this—that was a very painful thought.

She wondered more and more at the readiness of her father's consent for her to come now. She could not understand it. She did not like either to speak of it, for she found that Aunt Cissy always put on such a knowing look when she alluded to it, and even hinted that perhaps

her visit and proposition had been very opportune ; "but we shall see."

"See what?" Grace thought; and then an undefined vague presentiment of evil gathered on her heart, and made her nervous about post time; though she said she did not expect a letter. It came between her and her new happiness, and caused remarks and inquiries, till she felt ashamed, and feared her mind had been so long bent one way, towards trouble—that it had lost the power of turning to pleasure as it ought. It was very perverse, but she could not shake off anxiety and dread. Aunt Cissy observed that she was not so happy as at first, and fidgeted a little, having set her heart, as she said, on a perfect cure for Grace's low spirits. Then she proposed that the promised visit to the Home should be fixed.

It had been as yet delayed, as some building was going on, which made it inconvenient for them to receive visitors. But now they were to go. A fly was ordered, as it was too long a walk for Aunt Sarah, though pleasant for the young ones. The day after the morrow was fixed; and Grace felt that one of her secret and cherished dreams was to be shown her as real life.

To those who lead active and happy lives, in which pleasure takes its turn with duty, it is very difficult to understand the power which imagination has over those who live alone, without sympathy, and with no other means of enjoyment open to them than their own thoughts. Cut off and debarred, first, from any share of the amusements common to her age, and then from even its daily duties—finding real life, as far as she saw it, very dreary and painful—Grace, still young, was driven back to the innermost recesses of her own mind—in a world of her own creating. Many bright visions had she seen there, but as she grew older and more familiar with disappointment, she unconsciously grew to feel that except in imagination, goodness, such as she had dreamt of, could not exist in this world.

Now for the first time brought into contact with happy and high-principled persons like herself in age and station, she was astonished and incredulous. Every day she had a feeling that she was deceiving herself; that all would slide away, like the scenes in a theatre. This made her fearful and timid, shrinking back, when her first impulse was eager delight and admiration.

It gave, unknown to herself, a cold touch to

her manner in her intercourse with her cousins, specially with Cecilia, the one she most admired, and who came the most forward to her. Grace paused to think, if it was her own fancy or the real qualities of her cousin which charmed her. But as day by day strengthened the impression, a new sense of joy sprang up; and Grace was surprised at her own power of loving, for she had believed every feeling of the kind had died away and completely perished.

The visit to the Home was altogether one of the marked days of Grace's life. She was dumb with pleasure and delight at the look of the place and the Sisters, and full of earnest desire to hear more of the work. The quiet, orderly cheerfulness which stamped every thing, from the neat, sunny, private sitting-room belonging to the lady sisters, and the long school-room filled with orphans, and the beautifully fitted-up chapel, in which they all attended evening prayers. It all looked like a "Home," too happy, Grace thought, for this earth.

She and Cecilia kept together in the walk back, talking of it without reserve, Grace's cheeks flushing with excitement at all she heard. "But here comes Mr. Grant, the Chaplain and Head of the Sisterhood. He is the life and soul

of the work at present. He can tell you better than any one else all about it, and about such institutions in general."

As Cecilia spoke, they saw a tall, slight man approaching them. He stopped to speak to Cecilia; and on hearing of their visit, and that Grace had been pleased, and wished to know some facts, he turned round and accompanied them to the beginning of the street. Mr. Grant had a sister—a Mrs. Marks—a very agreeable, even winning person; except that she was one of those people who are always possessed with one idea—in common speech have a "hobby." She had entered with all her heart into the subject of Sisterhoods; and finding her brother quietly and in his silent way working at establishing the Home at Fordbridge, she espoused the cause.

At first the plan found a great deal of opposition. It set people up in arms, and fearing they hardly knew what. Mrs. Marks's rather injudicious treatment of the subject—her urging it on every one, and exalting it as the first of duties, did harm. And Mr. Grant had to beg her, for the sake of the cause, to moderate her zeal.

Meanwhile his earnest, quiet perseverance,

and his conscientious attention to every other kind of work and duty, had the effect of lessening alarm, and increasing confidence. And then God prospered the work itself in spite of all talk for and against it: and Mr. Grant was content for it to win its own way and not be popular. He felt it had a blessing, and could afford patience to overcome prejudice in time.

Silent as he was by nature, and little given to speak much about what lay nearest his heart, he was pleased at so eager a listener and inquirer as Grace was.

He told her the rise and growth, and the purpose of the Institution, and promised to introduce his sister to her, with this caution, that Mrs. Marks was too much of a partisan to be considered a fair adviser, as to who should, and who should not seek to work there.

Mrs. Marks received Grace with open arms, and soon found a way to Grace's heart, who confided all her wishes and her difficulties; Mrs. Marks assuring her that she was made, cut out, for the work; and adding to the girl's secret longing to be there, tenfold.

"It will end in Mrs. Marks persuading Grace to be a Sister," said Lydia Banks.

"Well, and it might be a happy thing for

her. But what will her father say?" said Aunt Cissy.

But many a walk and talk planned by Mrs. Marks and Grace fell to the ground by a summons coming for Grace to return home the next day. Briefly she was told of her father's intended marriage with Mrs. Jessop. Grace was desired to come home and help in preparing for this event. The wedding was to take place immediately, and Grace was to be left in charge of the house and children, while the bride and bridegroom had a month's travelling.

CHAPTER XII.

It was with a very heavy heart that Grace drove up to the front door of her home. Yet it was a truly lovely day—summer yet lingering, and as it were, shaking hands with autumn. Bright sunshine falling on the richly-tinted leaves, and bringing out the brilliant greens of the mosses, while fewer leaves only more distinctly showed the outline of each branch and twig. Grace, though apt to dwell much on

such beauties, hardly noted it. She slightly shivered, as she glanced timidly and anxiously at the windows and the door which stood open. She felt as if the pleasant scenes and all the bright thoughts which had been her's yesterday, had vanished, and that she had really only been dreaming, and now awoke to real life.

"Well," Mrs. Jessop greeted her. "Can't say your visit has done much for you. Bless me, don't bring such a gloomy face here. Don't want it, I can tell you. 'Twill be for your interest to look pleasant, and meet your father with another countenance."

Grace tried to do so, with the memory of Uncle Hugh and his daughters strong before her. She was surprised and touched by her father's kissing her. He seemed somewhat ill at ease, she thought, and awkward. All dinner-time it was the same. He was not rough or angry, but silent, and as if his thoughts were far away.

Mrs. Jessop was the one talker, in a loud, self-sufficient, vulgar tone. Nothing was said of Grace's visit. She asked herself if it was a real fact that she had been there at all. There was much to be done, much to hear from Mrs. Jessop ; and Grace's time was entirely occu-

pied, so that except when she retired for the night, too tired for anything but sleep, she literally had no time for dwelling on the past, except indeed in that way in which we can carry about the sense of some great good—some great blessing, which has not yet come in to our daily lives, but is a treasure unfolded, safe in our own heart's keeping, for some future hour.

The wedding was a quiet affair. Mr. Bracy insisted on this. Miss Lee and Miss Stafford were the only guests, besides the Clergyman—not the Vicar—he was gone; but Mr. Stone, his temporary successor. It was the first time Grace had seen Miss Patty Lee since Harry Vane left. She saw at once how little that was forgotten or forgiven. Miss Lee's hand was both stiff and cold when she offered it, and her look full of angry reproach, which Grace but too well understood; and though hurt, she was drawn towards Miss Lee, and could if she had dared, have thanked her for her constant and partial love for Harry. It opened this wound afresh—not that it was ever healed; but Grace had persuaded herself that she had given it all up, and though she looked forward to the possibility of hearing of his reform, as her one great happiness, she knew she had hurt and offended

him too much, for him to seek her again, even if she desired it. And did she? . . .

This question was stirred by the sight of Miss Lee, and the train of associations it awoke. It returned again that night when all bustle was over, the company gone, and Grace was left alone with the servants, to put away the best china and glass, &c., and fulfil her step-mother's repeated injunctions as to domestic affairs. The thought came, but it startled her, as if it was something forbidden and wrong. No! Harry was nothing—never could be otherwise than nothing to her now! And then she forced herself to take a flight, and soon folded her wings over the Home. That was henceforth to be her desire, her object in life.

The night before leaving, she had opened her heart to Cecilia, and after telling the principal points of her history, her cousin had entirely agreed that Grace was just the very person suitable for a Sister—marriage was of course out of the question. Having given up Harry from duty, she could never feel free to marry another, even if she could desire it; and this to both young girls appeared impossible. Grace was even led on to describe him.

“Ah, how brave you are, Grace! How could

you say ‘no’ to him? Are you not afraid you have driven him to harm? No—I don’t mean that,” she added hastily, frightened at the wild look of horror in her friend’s eyes; “you were right—quite right! I respect you for it, dear; and it makes you so exactly the person to be a Sister. If Mrs. Marks did but know—”

“Cecilia, please never tell her all I have told you,” said Grace. And Cecilia promised silence.

Grace felt that this conversation, and the sight of Miss Lee, had gone far to undo much of her work. It had let in forbidden thoughts and regrets: so she set herself, as a treat after the strict performance of household work, to study the tracts Mr. Grant had lent her.

She was pleased to act mistress in her home again, and pleased to have her little sisters for a time, though they were more unruly than before. The servants liked it, especially the cook, who had already given warning, and was to leave in a month. “She couldn’t stay on no how with the missis,” she said, “sorry as she was to leave her old place, and a good one too.”

After three rainy days, in which Grace’s patience had been severely tried by the children, she proposed a treat for the two elder ones and

herself—to go into the town for a little shopping, and then to end with a visit on Aunt Betsy.

In one of the shops Grace met Mrs. Eberley. Knowing herself to be no favourite of that old lady,—for Judith used to make a point of telling her sister all the remarks, good or bad, she ever heard about her,—Grace coloured up, and felt rather awkward. At first she hoped that the lady did not recognise her, but Mrs. Eberley turned back as she reached the door, and said,

“Are you not a Bracy? Ay, I thought so; not that you are like your father or sister. I can’t flatter you with any resemblance; but that little thing there is a Bracy all over. So, your father is married again, eh? And a wise step, if he had but made a right choice. As it is—umph—does he expect any one to call on his bride?”

And she stooped, and apparently paused for an answer, her bright and questioning eyes trying to gather the sense from Grace’s countenance. Mrs. Eberley was very deaf, and Grace’s voice utterly failed as she strove to reply.

“Tell him—tell your father I am sorry I can’t have the pleasure of either congratulating

him or noticing his wife. And, by the way, have you heard from—from—your sister?"

Grace shook her head, whilst tears of shame and distress filled her eyes.

"If you wish to hear of her,—and you ought to know, for it's a moral lesson for every young wilful girl—come to me. I will tell you."

And nodding her head, with fire in her eyes and yet a half relenting look of kindness, Mrs. Eberley rustled out of the shop.

"The great lady of Heathercombe—one privileged to say and do what she liked," as the mistress of the shop very quietly observed to Grace, noticing her trouble, and pitying her.

Glad to finish her shopping, and hoping for the quiet comfort Aunt Betsy always gave, she hastened to Miss Stafford's house. There, to her great disappointment, she found visitors. Harry Vane's father was there, with his gold spectacles, poring over a closely written letter; and there sat Miss Patty Lee, with ill-suppressed exultation and triumph in every look and every movement.

"You are engaged—I will come another day," Grace said, in a hesitating and timid way.

But Aunt Betsy drew her in, kindly pressing her hand while she said,

"Mr. Vane came to read me a letter; but it is finished. You must take off your things and stay tea. I insist! It will save me a walk, for I must have seen you to-morrow."

Now Mr. Vane had never at all encouraged his son's attachment for Grace. He had nothing to say against her, and even sometimes allowed that marriage with a good girl might steady the boy. But he was a proud old gentleman, reduced in life, but very proud and stiff in his notions. He did not like Mr. Bracy in any way, and considered his son was lowering himself by the connection. Then Mrs. Bracy —what a sawney, sickly, lackadaisical woman! and her daughter was like her somewhat in appearance: no wife for a giddy-pate, poor, extravagant fellow, like Harry. He set himself against it; and yet, when it was told him that Harry had been "jilted,"—that Grace had broken off her engagement,—the poor old man, sore-hearted and miserable, repenting his harsh words, and longing to bring back his only child, if he knew how, without compromising his own dignity, turned round and vented his wrath and vexation on the heartless girl who could so vex his boy! Yes, he was unsteady, but so were others. Why was she to set up for perfection?

Why, it was an honour to her to be asked by Harry. If he became reckless, his father knew where would lie the blame, &c., &c.

Grace did not know all this; but she knew that Mr. Vane had not liked their attachment. She never met him. Once or twice, she had seen him in the Green Lane—that lane outside Mr. Vane's field—and where she had parted with Harry. It lay in the short cut to Cross Farm, and Grace often passed it; but when she saw the poor old gentleman pacing slowly with his arms tucked under his coat tails behind, she managed to turn away before he had raised his eyes.

This was their first meeting therefore. Mr. Vane pushed back his spectacles, and gave a very slight nod towards Grace, glancing sharply, yet not directly, at her. He folded up the letter, and clearing his throat vigorously, gave it to Miss Lee. She received it with a smile, and said, "Well!"

"Well! and—as you say—good news, Miss Lee. Fine field for young blood! Space for all! Yes, indeed, they do appear to be doing very fairly indeed! Has Mr. Bracy heard from his son by this ship?" He did not address Grace, or even turn towards her.

"I don't know. I rather think not. John does not correspond with your father, eh, Grace?" said Miss Lee.

"I don't know . . . I think—that is . . ."

"Perhaps there is a letter by this ship, just come in you see, my dear," suggested Aunt Betsy, to relieve Grace's embarrassment.

"Yes, very likely. There are many letters for my father at home," Grace said.

"And when do the 'happy pair' return?" asked Miss Lee, with a dry voice.

"Good heavens! what could Bracy be about?" exclaimed Mr. Vane, rising from his seat. "Does he know—do you suppose he can be aware—of—of—the . . ."

Miss Lee looked mysterious, and shook her head. Aunt Betsy coloured up and grew fidgety, and proposed that Grace should go into her room, and take off her own and the little girls' bonnets. They did so; and when they returned Mr. Vane was gone. Miss Lee was evidently going to remain for tea. Aunt Betsy took the children to see her parrot, and to cut up some cake. While she was absent, Miss Lee said, "It will not be very pleasant for you, I should think, with this new stepmother."

"I hope it will. I think she is not unkind;

and if—if it makes father more happy and cheerful . . . ”

“ Shame upon him ! He should have had more respect for your mother’s memory. Though she was a poor thing and tried his temper, she was a worthy and respectable woman. With children, too—a grown-up daughter—to bring such a creature to his home . . . All men are alike !”

Grace said nothing.

“ Well !” Miss Lee said sharply, after a pause. “ I suppose you begin to regret your own prudish conduct with poor Harry now ! You find sweethearts don’t grow on every bush—especially such as he is—and you see, if you had acted less selfishly you would have been rewarded ! I always said that boy would do well if once put in a fair road. His old father was his hindrance. He is making his fortune fast. Your brother, of course, comes in for the profits ; though, as Harry provided the money, he is the great gainer. He writes full of spirits, likes the climate and the country, seems to have met some nice and kind people—a retired officer and his family—very musical the young ladies are, and their house seems to lie most conveniently in the road which Harry has often to pass. I should not be surprised to hear he was married any day. Harry is

domestic, and wild as he was, he has a loving heart. I shall be very glad!" Miss Lee turned to look at Grace, as she stopped from want of breath. But Grace was looking intently out of the window.

Presently she said in a very quiet, low, but calm voice, "Does he say anything of John—I mean, is there any chance of *his* marrying? It would be such a comfort to hear it!"

"I don't know indeed. They both seem on intimate terms with this family; but Harry writes chiefly of himself to me."

Another short pause; and then Aunt Betsy came back, followed by two happy and eager children who had warmed under her genial influence. During tea, Aunt Betsy asked about Grace's visit to her relations, and this brought forth an animated description of The Home, and Grace's opinion that Aunt Betsy was the person of all others to go there.

"Good patience! What next! The world is turning upside down, I do believe! Betsy, for goodness' sake, don't be listening to such stuff. I mistrust you! You are as bad as any giddy, sentimental girl sometimes. And if this is the good you have gained by going on a visit, you had better have stayed at home, in my opinion,"

Miss Lee said sternly. And turning to Grace at the same time, she rose, and said she must be going.

"Has Grace frightened you away?" laughed Aunt Betsy.

"Well, not exactly; but I am going to see about the commissions this boy has given me. It is all easy enough to get the things, but how on earth I am to get them safely conveyed to him, 16,000 miles, is a puzzle!"

"I think—I fancy . . ." but Grace stopped short from shyness.

"What is your fancy? Speak out!"

"Couldn't Uncle Hugh help you? He has so much to do with ships."

"To be sure!" said Aunt Betsy.

"Umph! Not a bad idea! More sense than that twaddle about Sisters and Homes. Good evening! I hope you and your father don't expect me to be coming to your house. I went to the wedding out of consideration for—for . . . in fact Bracy is a kinsman, and . . . But after one formal call, I can't and I won't have anything to do with *her*; and if he gives you an opportunity, tell him so. Good evening all!" said Miss Lee.

"What is it, Aunt Betsy? Pray tell me the

real truth about it. It is best to know all!" Grace said with trembling earnestness.

So sending the little girls away with the servant to give Polly some sugar—when the tea-things were cleared away—Aunt Betsy drew the poor girl close to her, kissed her, and said kind, fond words, and then told her something—all that was needful for her to know of her step-mother's history. It was a bad, but not uncommon one.

"It was very, very wrong in him. I don't see how he can expect you to live in the house. Do you think he does?"

"I think so—I don't know; he would not miss me, for—for—I never have suited him. But ought I not to stay? Ought I to leave my little sisters, when poor mother said so much to me about them? O, mother, mother!" And not able to keep up any longer, she buried her face in the hard, cold, horse-hair sofa cushion, and cried bitterly.

All her calm, subdued manner was gone. She turned, with a vehemence Aunt Betsy had never seen in her, saying,

"Tell me, what ought I to do? May—may I go? Will it be right? O, would to God I might! If I could but go away and work—"

"Where would you go, Grace?"

"Anywhere! I could teach—as a servant—or—or—why shouldn't I go to the Home? I know I might, even if father wouldn't pay the money asked. They do sometimes excuse it, and I would work double and cost very little. May I go?"

"We must consider—we must think it over. It is a difficult case. Perhaps your work may lie at home, more than ever now. Your father may learn to come to you, Grace—and then those little ones! You could hardly leave them to her?"

"But what can I do, unless she lets me? Before this, she was very jealous of my saying a word, and kept them much from me. Now—of course, she is absolute mistress. What can I do then?"

"Still you may do much. Indirectly you will influence the children and the household. Your presence may be a restraint on her. Besides, after all, who knows? She may be led into a better path now. We must try to make it easy for her to begin a new life. I am not afraid of you, Grace. She can do you no harm. I hope you may, through God's help, do her good."

Grace shook her head in sad despair.

"After all, my dear girl, there may be a path opening to you, of very real work, quite as full of self-devotion as in the Home. You are gentle and patient, firm too; you must cultivate faith in yourself, and quietly, who can say what you may not do? Now that her position is certain, she will not care to be governess. She will be only too glad to give it up to you, I believe. So—how much will rest with you for these little creatures! No, Grace, my dear, the more I look at it, the clearer I see that under certain conditions, your place is at home, and that never before had you work so clearly given you as now. If things go on, as we may surely expect and trust they will, you must not leave, while your father allows you to remain. I know you are a good girl, anxious to do your duty; so I speak plainly. I don't say it is a very bright prospect. It is full of trouble and difficulty, but it may turn out better than you and I suppose. It is good to be sure of one's duty, to see the way clearly"

"But I don't, quite. If what you tell me is true—why, am I right to live with—with *her*, when I refused to live with poor Harry, who surely was not half so bad? It seems so incon-

sistent, Aunt Betsy! It is encouraging wrong doing—it is hypocrisy; for now I know the truth, I can't pretend to like or respect her—not even—as my father's wife—as the mistress of the house! O I can't live with her! Is it likely she is really changed? And if you only knew—if you had heard her coarse way of talking—her views . . . O I always shuddered at it! But now—now—Aunt Betsy! think, would mother have liked it? She who so abhorred even a rude word!" . . .

"No, my dear! But would she wish you to leave her little ones, so young they may learn anything?"

"Then they should leave with me. We must all go. Father must see the necessity of it, or I surely can work and maintain us all."

"It might just possibly come to that, but not yet. No, indeed, Grace, you must try what can be done at home. For your father's sake, even, you must not be in a hurry to go. Wait—pause—judgment will be granted if we seek it. I hope I have done well in telling you the truth."

"You can't doubt it, Aunt Betsy?"

"Well—certainly you would have heard allusions, and you are old enough to act. And I always think it best to look truth fairly in the

face. We blunder sadly in trying to veil and hide things, out of good motives. My dear, I wish I could help you. I wish I could see a happier face. All the light and the colour I saw when you returned home, is gone again ; and you were happy there, Grace ?”

“ O yes ; I never shall be so happy again. It is like a dream, a story ! I wish you knew Cecilia. I hoped she might—but, O ! Aunt Betsy, she will never be allowed to visit me ! No one will do so ! Now I understand Mrs. Eberley’s words and looks ! And poor, poor Judith ! What a set we are, Aunt Betsy ! No wonder Mr. Vane looked so proudly and scornfully at me ! ” and her sickly smile made Miss Stafford’s heart ache.

“ I don’t think that was his feeling, my dear. It was a little pride and triumph, which he can’t help showing ; forgetting, poor old man, that no one was so harsh or severe as himself. Grace, my dear, in all this trouble—that is one good, happy thought, isn’t it ? ”

“ What ? ”

“ That instead of our fears being realised, it has pleased God to bless him. That both young fellows, John and Harry, are doing well, in a double sense, as I believe they are.”

"I'm glad of it!" Grace sighed out. Then added, "Yes—thankful—for I did dread the accounts so much, so terribly, that I feared to go to sleep, for the dreams I had. Well, that is spared me. I have not driven him to sin; and after all, he may live to thank me. Even he, had he kept to his old feelings, would change now. It is best as it is. I am glad neither of the boys, John or Robert, are here; though Robert must have known—guessed"

Miss Stafford was looking at Grace anxiously trying to read her thoughts. Grace suddenly looked up from the carpet and met this wistful gaze. She blushed, and said, "Why do you look at me, Aunt Betsy? What are you thinking of?"

"I was wondering—forgive me, Grace—if you had given up all—idea—hope of—?"

"I know! I know what you mean! O, Aunt Betsy! How can you ask me? You know there is no hope—not an atom! I destroyed it all myself. I did it—I killed it. Don't ever look so again. Don't speak so. You must not. Of course, I like to hear any good news—any news. But beyond that, nothing. It is my rule not to speak—not to think. Mother is dead! That is dead! More so! for

I can and do think of her, and it does me good.
But”

The door opened, and the servant said in a flurried way, that a messenger was come from Cross Farm, and Miss Bracy was wanted there directly.

“ Why, what is it ? ” Grace started up, and Aunt Betsy looked anxious. It was the gardener’s boy.

“ Please, Miss, the Master and the Missis are come back, and bid me seek and fetch you immediate ; and if you please, ‘tis going to rain, and shall I fetch a fly ? ”

“ No ; it will only be a shower ; I had rather walk,” said Grace, flushed and trembling, and scarcely conscious of the offer, she accepted Aunt Betsy’s umbrella, hurried on her bonnet and the children’s, and with a sob, instead of a word, received Aunt Betsy’s tearful “ Good-bye, and God bless you ! ”

CHAPTER XIII.

THE quiet and almost absolute stillness which Grace had left at Cross Farm was gone when

she returned ; having, during her walk, tried to rouse all her courage and hopes for the dreaded meeting. The house seemed full of noise—calling here, hammering there, servants carrying up trunks and parcels, and Mrs. Bracy finding fault with everything, ordering fires and dinner, and so on, in a sharp, loud voice, which startled every one.

She was in too great a bustle to bestow much greeting on Grace. She wondered they had not been ready, and expected them any day ; she said that Mr. Bracy was ill, and wanted to go to bed ; instead of which, here was the room, uncarpeted, and all disarranged. Which it was ; Grace and the maids having settled that they should have due notice of the day, and so not hurrying over the regular “cleaning out” which housemaids love, when occasion offers.

Grace was sorry, and went to find her father. He had taken refuge in the fruit garden—a sheltered and private spot he was always fond of. Here Grace found him.

His reception of Grace was not unkind, but it was hurried, and as if he was ill at ease. He looked pale and worn ; and altogether Grace felt a great pity, a great desire, if she could, to show her dutiful love and wish to please him.

She suggested his resting on the couch till his own bed was ready.

"No; I am well here, child! Quiet, quiet! Here it is only the chirping birds. Where is the key of my room? No one has been there, I hope, with duster and broom?"

"O no!" Grace hastened to assure him. "But it will be too cold there without a fire. Shall I order one at once—only this first evening"

"I shan't go there to-night. It must be ready to-morrow. I say, Grace, I think you had better take the little girls again; unless they go to school, which—which—your—which Mrs. Bracy seems to think best. But there is the expense!"

"Please to let me have them," Grace said very earnestly.

He looked at her for a moment, and said, "I wish it; but, Grace, you are too mopy, she says. You must do it in real earnest if at all, and then it will be but for a time. Umph! You will not be long here, of course."

What could he mean! Why did he look so at her! Grace thought.

"Here—stop! Where are you going? I may as well tell you, now I have time and quiet.

The fact is, I have had a very flattering, very handsome offer—quite the proper thing. It speaks volumes in his favour. But of course you guess what it is?"

Grace did not. She did not betray any consciousness, as he perceived; so taking another turn, he took out a letter, and said, "Young Harris, the Draper's son at Fordbridge, seems to have met you there, at your uncle's. He asks my leave to visit at our house; and in fact, to pay his addresses to you."

"To me!"

"Yes! It can't be so very unexpected on your part, I should think. Surely he has given some cause for your expecting this?"

"None." Yet, even as she spoke, Grace recalled the shy, blushing attention this young man had tried to pay her. She had pitied his awkward shyness, in their large family party, and had tried to make it less formidable. She remembered, too, hearing Uncle Hugh speak much in his praise. His father was a very thriving Linen Draper, and intended taking this his only son into partnership.

"Well!" said Mr. Bracy, "I see you are refreshing your memory. And this is an offer not to be despised. I hardly think—hem

perhaps this may not be quite—quite so comfortable for you now. It is worth consideration, I can tell you. I shall tell him he is welcome. Among the heap of letters," he presently went on, "there was one from that scamp John. He thinks because he has good news to tell, he may reckon on pardon. He is mistaken. Rich or poor, I have done with him! But from what he says—here, take it and read for yourself"—and he gave her the letter.

"Father," Grace struggled to speak quietly and clearly, "Please don't invite Mr. Harris. I can't; indeed, I can't."

"Nonsense! Stuff! Read that first, and wait a week, and then see. You'll only be too glad." And Mr. Bracy passed her quickly, going into the house. Grace remained to ponder over this sudden news and to read her brother's letter.

This garden was walled on three sides, and at the top was a nicely-kept gravel path, a pleasant and sheltered walk, where one might watch the first burst of the leaves, and then the shy, soft, pink buds of peach and nectarine and plum: where bees came for early flowers, and where many a rare dish of early strawberries were gathered. The ground sloped down, the well-

dug beds for fruit, and vegetables; ending in an orchard, where some choice apple and pear trees grew, and where grass was allowed to remain. It ended in a brook, which widened into a kind of pond. Here a seat had been erected ; here blue bells, primroses, and daffodils were found. Birds built their nests, and some pet muscovy ducks flourished. It was a very favourite resort for Grace and the little ones. It was to this seat, in spite of a chill breeze, that she took her letter.

John's letter contained no great news to Grace. She had heard most of it that day at Aunt Betsy's. They were doing very well, having made a fortunate purchase of a flock of sheep. John said that Harry would soon be a rich man. He was a general favourite. Then he went on to say, the only thing wanting for their home comfort was a woman. A lady might be very comfortable there, and John was anxious for his partner to bring home a wife. He said he himself must wait a little for prudence' sake; but he knew where to look and thereupon expatiated on the agreeable qualities of a certain family, of whom it was evident they saw a great deal. He said that Harry was a fool if he didn't see the welcome a pretty pair of black eyes al-

ways gave him ; and he shouldn't be surprised what news his next letter might not convey. He encouraged the idea of Robert's coming to them, and even hinted, that if younger, his father would do well to do so too.

The tone of the letter surprised Grace. John's gloomy reserve seemed to have melted. There was cordial affection in his words. She wondered his father was not more pleased. She sat for some time very still, and then she rose up and slowly walked back to the house. A close observer might have seen a more set look about her mouth, and even more quiet sadness than usual in her soft hazel eyes. Her voice too, had a mixture of determination and great gentleness, and had lost its usual tone of doubt. She was very quiet in her way of taking her place in the family party, and tried to give cheerful answers to Mrs. Bracy's rough jokes. Once or twice during the meal, she met her father's eyes bent on herself, with a new expression of interest, and then a shiver of fear and regret—a dread of giving pain, arose.

It was not till he had left the room to go to bed as he said, that Grace followed him and returned the letter. "Thank you ! But—father, please don't ask Mr. Harris here. It can't be.

I have no wish—no intention of marrying at all.
Let me have the little girls and stay here."

He was beginning some angry remonstrance, when Mrs. Bracy opened the door to order him not to be standing about in passages. On which he hastened away to his room, and Grace returned to the parlour. She foresaw fresh trouble—yet she hoped. If she could but succeed in keeping the little ones happy and in order, her father might not wish her to go. It was a relief to her to find that as yet her stepmother was ignorant of Mr. Harris' offer.

For a few days, Grace's hopes seemed about to be realized. Mr. Bracy was seriously ill owing to a neglected cold, and kept his room and bed, his wife attending to him herself, and not allowing one of his children to go to him. Grace took the little girls, and but for an occasional storm in the kitchen, and the very rough words Mrs. Bracy used at such times, Grace hoped things might go on as smoothly.

Very few persons called, much to Mrs. Bracy's indignation. She had set her mind on playing the great lady, and already planned a party, not caring to wait for the usual plan, of being herself invited first. This caused a great dispute between Mr. and Mrs. Bracy, as soon as he was

well enough to come down. He would have no one invited, and at last in the heat of anger, told her plainly, she need not expect to be visited, and had better keep quiet.

The only notice taken of Grace's answer about Mr. Harris, was that the young man was invited to the house to spend a Sunday, very much to poor Grace's trouble. He showed but too plainly what were his wishes, and Grace found no opportunity to explain her own. Of course the fact was no longer a secret to Mrs. Bracy, and she told Grace that it was her positive duty to get married at once. That her father had lost some money lately, and she owed it to him to be independent of him."

Grace kept up a brisk correspondence with Aunt Cissy and with Cecilia. To both, in different ways, she confided her troubles, and her great wish, which she found grew stronger and stronger, namely, to be, if possible, a Sister in "the Home."

CHAPTER XIV.

It was Christmas Day again—very cold, and with a biting east wind, which generally does not come so soon in the season. Grace, with two of her young sisters, was at Church, but no one else from Cross Farm. Mrs. Bracy had of late taken a fancy to attend at the Independent Chapel, when she went any where, and there had already been one or two noisy arguments, as to her taking the children there also. It was another trial which threatened Grace, for her father had learnt to be even more angry with this Clergyman than with the Vicar, and in some vestry meeting, he had been so extremely violent and angry, as to threaten “to leave the Church, he and all his family.”

Coming out into the churchyard, after the Holy Communion, Grace found Aunt Betsy waiting, very blue with cold, but bright and kind as ever. She must wish Grace a “Merry Christmas,” she said. Grace tried to smile, and return the greeting with warmth, but her spirit failed, and she broke down, ending her sentence with a little choking sob, she tried to hide by a cough.

"It is too cold to stand; I will go a little way with you," Aunt Betsy said. "Ah, my dear, I have been wishing to see you. I fear all the sad tales I hear, are but too true. Poor girl, you look very ill and worn." Finding that Grace could not speak just yet, she went on. "About young Harris, Grace. Your step-mother has been speaking about it in the town, I grieve to say. My dear, are you quite wise to refuse him? He is a very worthy fellow, and could offer you a happy home. I hear he is truly attached to you, and really cast down about it. You see—I believe"—she hesitated—"you have heard—Patty Lee seems to think it so certain that Harry"

"I know, I know! O Aunt Betsy, that isn't it! I gave him quite up. He is as free as possible. I expect to hear of his marriage in the next letter. But I am not likely to marry. I don't wish it. If—if—I could do any good to any one by staying, I had rather be at home. But if they don't want me, and it seems so, there is a place I should like to go to; and, perhaps, it will come to that. Aunt Betsy! if father insists on my leaving the Church, it can't be my duty to obey him. I am nearly twenty-two now. I should then choose for myself.

Only—only—it seems so hard for all his children to forsake him so."

"Indeed it does. I hope you will not do that unless really obliged. It can never be right."

"I don't know. I can't make up my mind. Mr. Grant thinks it may be my duty. Aunt Cissy, too, thinks I have good reasons for leaving home; and Cecilia wonders at my holding back. It is to do good. It is no idle life of pleasure. I should be at work there. Here, what can I do? If you knew—if you could but guess how it is, how I am thwarted, what I have to hear and see—why half my time I am idle, doing nothing. And now the children are all going to a school, kept by some relation of hers. I have said all I can, more than I ought even; but father gives way at last, for peace. She is sending him to the grave, or worse."

"Very grievous! very bad!" said Aunt Betsy.
"Have you ever asked your father about your going to The Home?"

"Yes. He has forbidden my even writing to one of the Sisters. He was very angry at my seeing Mrs. Marks one day, when she was at a house near us. Of course, he won't hear of it."

"Then, my dear, don't go. Let me advise—

persuade you—to take up the task God has set you. Who is to take your place at home? If your father is ill, who is there to be with him?"

"And yet you regret my not marrying and so of course leaving home," Grace said a little sharply.

"Because that is generally a woman's natural vocation and brings its own duties. If your father liked this, I see no harm in it."

"O, Aunt Betsy, parents must soon learn to allow their children more liberty—give them more scope. All can't marry, and look how numbers of young women waste life!" Grace said, eagerly.

"True, very true. I believe that it will be so, and people will learn to allow their children to work in this way—but I can't see that it applies to you, my dear. I see, with pain, your troubled lot; but, as your friend, I can't see that this way is open to you yet. I may be wrong, but it seems like flying from duty, because it is hard. I think I would rather have you, if it must be to leave home, without attempting this kind of work."

"You doubt me, I see! Yet you don't know all. However, I have settled to try and go

on at home. I will not be in a hurry. I will see if I can do any good by staying."

"What would our own Vicar say?" Aunt Betsy observed, as she shook Grace's hand, turning to go back.

"Ah! but things are altered. I am older. Things are altered, Aunt Betsy!"

So they parted; and Grace returned with a flushed face, and a good deal of the peace she hoped to gain in Church clouded over by the strife in her own mind. She had risen that morning with a full conviction that her right path lay in quitting her home and devoting herself to a good work.

Mrs. Marks' letters were more and more urgent and persuasive. She made Grace's wrongs and trials her own, and while she pitied her, showed her a way to escape, and said such work and such a refuge was made for a case like hers. Grace had worked herself up into a fit of deep religious enthusiasm, indignant at the evils around her, at the sins of her stepmother, and now the violence of her father against the clergyman.

Since she had plainly refused Mr. Harris and made the young man himself aware of her own feelings, which had been studiously hidden from

him by others, her stepmother's temper had been almost unbearable.

Vexed at not being noticed, Mrs. Bracy had given up her attempts to become respectable. Openly, she indulged in miserable habits and so badly ordered the house, that scarcely a proper servant would remain there. She was extravagant and idle, and Mr. Bracy retired more and more to his own rooms and looked worn and old.

Mrs. Bracy's threat was carried into execution, and three of the children were taken by her to a school twenty miles away. Lydia remained, being much out of health. She fell naturally to Grace's care, and having a duty to her, it lessened her desire to go to The Home.

It so happened that on the very day after Mrs. Bracy had gone with the children, Aunt Cissy, Cecilia, and Mr. Grant and Mrs. Marks, drove to Cross Farm to see Grace. Mrs. Bracy did not return till the evening, so Grace had them quietly. She told her father, who frowned and told her not to be encouraging visitors,—“it was no house for strangers.” He did not come down to luncheon, but he happened to come upon them afterwards, as Grace showed them round the place. Mr. Bracy could be very pleasant when

he pleased, and on Mr. Grant's asking about his new scheme for heating buildings, he threw off his coldness and even introduced him to his experiment-room and explained his plan. Mr. Grant was surprised at his genius and the language in which he expressed himself, and with his usual facility he managed to throw himself into Mr. Bracy's character and drew out his confidence. Grace was pleased and proud of her father; Aunt Cissy all astonishment, believing Mr. Grant could do anything with anybody.

Cecilia was looking particularly pretty in a violet merino dress, and Mr. Bracy's keen eye for beauty was evidently struck. He was quite pleasant and lively with her, even asking her to come and stay a week with Grace, as soon as the weather was a little more inviting.

It was one of the very few white days in Grace's calendar. "A wonderful day"—as she sighed to herself, when the fly drove away with the party.

* * * * *

Meanwhile they were saying that Cecilia must certainly accept the offer.

"Why," said Mrs. Marks, "Grace is made for a Sister—even to her very voice and her

movements. Poor girl, she is so proved, so thoroughly tried. She is the very person to help others. She needs help. She is too yielding—too open to the influence of affection. I can understand now better where the strong attraction is, which, in spite of much misery, draws her to her father. Through her we shall get at him perhaps. At all events, it would be cruel to leave her in such an ungenial place. Yes, Cecilia must go, and use all her persuasion to bring Grace to us."

"Not against her father's commands—God forbid!" said Mr. Grant.

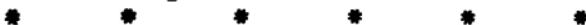
"Poor Grace! she doesn't look so very sad as I expected, after hearing of that Mr. Vane's probable marriage," sighed out Cecilia.

"Why—hadn't she broken it off before?" was Aunt Cissy's simple remark.

"O!" observed Mrs. Marks, "she is far too good for him—or for any one else."

"Indeed, Mrs. Marks, that is going farther than I can follow," said Aunt Cissy. "Only after such a disappointment as it was, I don't expect Grace could ever care to marry."

"She must come to us and be a Sister, that is certain," repeated Mrs. Marks.



"Why, Grace, you never said what a lovely girl your cousin was. Bless me, it is quite a treat to see such a face, so bright and blooming! And the old lady is as dry and simple as ever."

It was well that Grace had this little spot of brightness to look back on, for from that time week followed week of great gloom. The weather was unfavourable, and Cecilia's promised visit on that account delayed. Though there were other objections in Grace's mind, and she hardly liked bringing her cousin into such a home as it was.

Lydia grew much worse. The medical man was afraid that disease had begun in one lung. The sick room was Grace's refuge. She hardly ever left her sister. She went alone to church, always dreading that her father might one day forbid her going. Her stepmother had made many objections, but Grace quietly put them aside, thankful that hitherto her father had left her to do as she liked. Though each day as it came was full of trials for Grace, and very little ever happened to draw away her thoughts from the wretchedness that surrounded her, one day was too much like another for any description. Mrs. Marks did not at all give up her design of

getting Grace to be a Sister, but even she could not urge her to leave her sick sister, and while she continued to keep up her interest in the work, she ceased to bid her come at once.

CHAPTER XV.

IT was now in the middle of summer, Grace was bending over Lydia's couch to satisfy herself whether she was really only asleep, so very still the thin shadowy figure had been.

The buzz and murmur of insects, the fulness of life and sunshine, contrasted strangely with the fading dying look of the young girl. Grace looked very fagged and weary. Her sleep had been much disturbed, and her attention very close for many weeks. Now she was looking onwards. A week or so more, and how dull, how lonely she should be. With Lydia would perish all her life's interest—all her work!

In the house she was worse than nothing. She felt herself in the way of her stepmother, who had grown to show her great dislike in every look and word.

She had contrived also to prejudice the father

against his daughter, working on the old cause of estrangement.

He had been peculiarly strong and violent in his expressions against the Church of late, and in this way tried and grieved Grace very often. Further intercourse with Mr. Grant on the subject of hot air had shown his strong interest in Sisterhoods and in "the Home" in particular.

Mr. Bracy forbade the subject, and peremptorily put a stop to any correspondence between Mrs. Marks and his daughter. Fortunately for Grace, Cecilia's beauty seemed to create a prejudice in her favour, and her letters were allowed and her company again asked; but Grace herself said it was of no use now, she was so entirely taken up with Lydia. But Cecilia's girlish affectionate letters were her one pleasure.

She never saw Aunt Betsy, except for a moment after or before Church. Miss Stafford had offended Mrs. Bracy and was not received. Every one shunned the Cross Farm people, and very often Mr. Bracy threatened that he should have to give up the place and retire into a smaller house. His affairs were not prosperous Grace knew, and she observed an increasing neglect of the farm. No further letters had come from

Australia. There had been a report that John Bracy had gone still further into uncivilized country with some cattle, as Vane's partner; and that Robert had been tempted to try the gold diggings, but this intelligence had only come in a round-about way.

Mr. Bracy not having answered his son's letter did not expect another. He had sternly forbidden Grace from writing, which she had begun to do.

Neither of nor from Judith did they hear anything. Much Grace wondered where she might be, and when feeling more low and nervous than usual, she used to imagine the possibility of her return in want and misery. The Vicar too was still absent, and the accounts were not very promising of his ever being well enough to return to his work. This was another heavy loss; if it was only the seeing him in his own place in church and hearing his preaching.

"Grace! Grace!" Lydia awoke in a fright.
"Don't go—don't let her come in!"

"No one is here by me. I have not left you once, dear." And Grace raised her and offered her some water.

In doing so, she saw plainly that a change had come.

She hardly liked to ring the bell. She dreaded who might come. Yet to be alone. . . .

"Is it dark?" Lydia tried to say, gazing straight at the bright flood of sunbeams which poured athwart the room. "Hold me, Grace; I am ill!"

Grace clasped her hands—cold they were, as they had never been before.

"Your pain will soon be over, my darling. You will go to the good God and to mother."

"Shall I?—O—say a prayer!"

Grace prayed; but before the end she stopped, for Lydia was gasping. Then her head fell heavier on Grace's arm, a quiver over the whole face, and a shade of grey paleness came.

"I am alone now!" Grace cried out in her thoughts, "not one left! O Lydia!"

Very solemn was her prayer over her dead sister. Death brings facts in startling clearness to our minds. Grace felt for the first time clearly, at that moment, that in considering her future, and her going as a Sister to the Home, she must remember, that inclination led her very strongly one way. Though this alone did not stamp it as wrong, it was a point for consideration—something to be weighed in the balance.

How thankful she was now that she had not been persuaded to go long ago; that she had been at her post, by Lydia! Life seemed very dreary, and fervently she wished she might find a refuge there. It was all she asked for! But she prayed now, as she never had before, for a right judgment and for patience.

Then she left the room, to tell the others.

Mr. Bracy was overcome. He had not expected it to be so soon. He had never allowed himself to believe the extent of the danger. Then, he said, "it was well." There was nothing in life for regret. Lydia was at rest, at all events. And he shut himself up again, refusing admittance to any one.

It was indeed "lonely," when Lydia was buried, and Grace returned home—to what?—She looked around for some tie—some duty—in the shape of work, and saw none. No one wanted her! Why, then, would they not let her go? she thought.

Now, she began to feel all the exertions she had made. Her sleep would not come back, and there was a languor and restlessness she could not shake off. An invitation came from Fordbridge, but Mr. Bracy decidedly refused his consent, saying, they were all a set of incipient

Nuns and Priests. One day, however, he was overtaken in his way home by the doctor, who, in a blunt, determined manner, told him that Grace must be attended to, or soon she would follow her sister.

Mr. Bracy looked surprised, although he said something "that it was all a trick, a way Grace always had."

"It is a way which has but one ending, Mr. Bracy. Miss Grace wants rousing, and a little cheerful change. She is worn out and unhappy. Can't you let her have a companion, or a change?"

The consequence of this was, Mr. Bracy's taking his place in the coach which went three times a week to Fordbridge, and calling on his brother-in-law, Mr. Banks, with a request for his daughter Cecilia to spend a short time with Grace.

Mr. and Mrs. Banks hesitated. They had heard such doubtful reports of the present home arrangements, and of Mrs. Bracy, that they might well doubt as to sending their young daughter there. They proposed for Grace to come to them instead. But this Mr. Bracy refused at once; and then, knowing something of her loneliness, their kind hearts relented, and they agreed to trust their child for a time. Grace was almost too weary and indifferent

to be properly surprised and delighted when, without previous warning, her blooming, pretty cousin stood at her door.

Mr. Bracy looked displeased, and murmured that she was as inanimate as a log—had no feeling, &c., while Grace turned cold all over, and felt too sick and ill to give anything but a wretched welcome.

When they were alone, she threw herself on Cecilia's neck and cried. "Only think of your coming here at last! It is so good! But how could they let you come? It is no place for you, Cecilia!"

"It is your turn to be nursed now," Cecilia said, as she insisted on placing Grace on the sofa, and fetching her book and her work.

A fortnight had passed, and still there was no talk of her leaving. Grace had been very ill with an attack of nervous fever, and now Cecilia declared she could not leave her till she was well. The two girls were all day long together, generally undisturbed by any one; but a new cause for annoyance existed, which Cecilia dreaded for Grace when she was again well enough to join the party downstairs. Mrs. Bracy had brought a niece of her own, not a very young person, who promised to be anything but

a comfort to any one. She flattered her aunt in every way and waited on her, and Mrs. Bracy spoke of trying to get a little "cheerful society for the sake of the young people," and much to Grace's horror, actually not only called on one or two people in Heathercombe, but managed to have her visits taken kindly and returned. She assumed a quieter air, and talked of troubles and sorrows, and her anxiety to make the home more cheerful for Grace, and for this niece, who was an orphan, and wholly dependent on her for a home; though, Mrs. Bracy added, she had a handsome little independence of her own.

There are some people very open to flattery, and who prize a gossip, an insight into a neighbour's family, and a comfortable cup of tea, so very highly, that they are willing to sacrifice a little dignity for these pleasures. So notwithstanding, if not because of, Mrs. Bracy's reputation, there were a few who responded to her advances, and even said that in her fine mourning, she was a very handsome woman, and no doubt what she said was true,—Bracy was very peculiar,—very trying, and not domestic: and Grace looked her mother's own child,—quite a "kill joy." It must be trying for a warm-hearted, sociable woman. She seemed to

be very kind to the step-children, and was agreeable, and very polite in sending fruit and vegetables to people who had no gardens.

Mrs. Bracy succeeded in having her select set ; and though her husband growled at it, she even invited them all for the evening, and took pains to make it a pleasant country party, with syllabub, and junket, and harvest buns.

Grace and her cousin appeared ; the latter ready for any fun or enjoyment, only wishing poor dear Grace had been just a little stronger, and did not look so very pale and sad.

But it was so strange, so new to Grace ! and none of her old friends were of the party ; only some people she knew by sight, and some Miss Burys,—showy, noisy young women she had often seen Judith quiz and imitate.

Cecilia was quite the belle, and made much of by all. That was the one pleasant part of the evening, to Grace : the seeing her cousin's pretty manners and enjoyment. Mr. Bracy did not leave his room, but he did not check his wife's further efforts. And this party was by no means the only one. Besides this, the Cross Farm people were invited into the town, and to join pic-nics to the sea-side, or to a distant wood. Grace liked it while her cousin was there, but when

Cecilia left, she found it little to her taste. The rather noisy jokes and style of conversation, were distasteful to her. She had not Cecilia's tact to pass it off or check it. She felt herself looking cold and grave,—“primmy,” as Mrs. Bracy called it,—or very awkward and foolish. She thought her step-mother much too free in manner, and Miss Brown, her niece, very affected. The only interest Grace could get up, in any of the set, was for the Burys, who, though so little to her taste, had known Harry Vane intimately. To hear his name mentioned casually by one of them, was a new and thrilling pleasure, which she could not account for.

As autumn came, and she had quite recovered her strength, Grace sorely missed some work to do. She sewed and she read, and she tried to get up her music; but there had been no inducement lately. Mr. Bracy ceased to care for it since Judith left, and Grace had rather shunned playing before him on that account. But at the best, it is a very different thing to chalk out one's day with these forced occupations, however innocent or even improving they may be, from the having a certain portion of real work to do. This idle business, this purposeless existence, sends many a woman's mind to ruin. The more

amiable and less strongly marked characters rub on, only perhaps losing freshness and gaining slightly a little frivolity ; but there are others to whom it is death. Lack of nourishment acts like quick poison, and they plunge into habits of self-indulgence or dissipation. And this takes place in a country where marriage among the middle classes is daily becoming more difficult, and where hundreds of souls are perishing for lack of care and keep ! When shall we learn how to use our surplus energy and strength without the few who are brave enough to attempt it, being stigmatised as weak enthusiasts, or Papists in disguise ?

It is a question which Parents must study and find an answer for. It was one which Grace often asked herself, and never failed suggesting over and over again to Aunt Betsy, whenever a chance meeting gave her opportunity.

“ It may be so, my dear,” was always this lady’s reply. “ I agree with you. I think your uncle and aunt very right in sparing their child. But under your circumstances, I do not see how you can go ; at least, don’t call it a religious act. Say you wish it as any other pleasure.”

“ And so I do. And if they want me at home, why don’t they give me something to do ? ”

At last moved by Grace's increasing look of care, Aunt Betsy suggested her trying to interest herself in the few cottagers living near Cross Farm, seeing if she could help the children in any way or in sewing for the mothers. She supposed Mr. Bracy would not like her taking a class at the Sunday school? A teacher was much wanted. Grace knew it was vain to ask this, as it might imperil her attendance at church. But she tried to follow out Aunt Betsy's hints, and went to see the cottagers. She found in one, an old man who would be glad for her to read to him sometimes. He understood something of politics too, and missed his reading badly, since he hurt his eye. In another, the poor woman was only too thankful for Grace to make her small children's garments, and at last Grace got a nice little maiden as her own scholar. In order to prove that such work did not upset her as her father always argued it did, she was doubly careful to be regular and cheerful in the family circle. For some time all went on quietly, but by degrees, how Grace could not for a long time make out, Mr. Bracy got hold of misrepresented stories.

It was insinuated to him that his daughter was quite a home missionary, &c., and as his

own unfortunate natural dislike for her had been for some time freshly stirred up, he showed a jealous distrust of her. It was again near Christmas, when he called her to his room, in one of his most violent passions, saying he had long suspected she was trying to work against him, and now he had found her out.

"Pray how long had she kept up a secret intercourse with Mrs. Marks?"

Grace said she had never even seen her, except once in the street, since her father forbade it.

"Don't add lying to deceit and hypocrisy, girl. I saw her waiting at Robert Stokes' cottage. She didn't see me; but I saw her. What was she there for, but to meet you? And so this is your reason for reading to old Robert. You'll never do it again, so long as you live under my roof."

It was in vain for Grace to entirely deny all knowledge of Mrs. Marks' visit or ever having seen her there or anywhere else. Mr. Bracy would not hearken to her. He repeated his order and his threat, and bade her go.

"Father, you say, so long as I am under your roof," Grace said, almost beside herself, under pressure of this unkind and unjust accusation. "Do you mean by that I may leave it?

May I go? may I go and maintain myself anywhere?"

"Yes; and take my curse with you, for a disobedient undutiful child, as all the rest have been!" And he banged the door on her, having pushed her fairly out.

There was another severe struggle in Grace's mind that night. It was too hard!—She had very nearly decided and resolved to leave home, offering herself as teacher somewhere; perhaps delaying going to "The Home" for quieter and calmer judgment, but when she came down the next morning she learnt her father was ill with a severe attack of rheumatic gout.

Here was work for her: as she well knew, Mrs. Bracy was no sick nurse, and all the nursing and watching fell to Grace. It was a long and painful illness, and tried Grace's strength and patience to the utmost. But she reaped her reward in once or twice finding her father look and express pleasure at her return, when for needful rest she had been absent from him for a few hours. She so longed for love that even his look of pleasure and the simple words, "O, it is Grace; all right. I am glad you are come back!" was food for days.

Why couldn't her father like her as other

fathers liked other daughters ? she asked herself. Was it her own fault ? If she could but feel herself of consequence to him—a source of pleasure and useful—it was all she asked. Perhaps she was not open enough. She had always been afraid of him as a child, and had grown up under restraint, and with a sense of her mother's wrongs as a wife. She tried to throw off this reserve, and talk to him openly of her feelings. It was very difficult. He stared at her, and answered abruptly ; and then, as he grew a little easier and could sit up, Mrs. Bracy and her niece were more with him, and their society seemed ever to put Grace in the shade with him. She saw that Miss Brown had a way, whatever Grace said, quietly to give it a turn, displeasing to Mr. Bracy. It was done so quietly that it was long before Grace perceived it. When she did, she mustered up courage and did not let it pass ; but told Miss Brown she had misunderstood her.

About this time Miss Brown seemed to take a great interest in the subject of "The Home." She took up a book containing a short sketch of its institution and rules, when in Grace's room, and eagerly asked leave to read it ; and from that time she ever seemed to take every oppor-

tunity of talking of it to Grace, and said it was a thing she should like for herself. Then she suddenly asked Grace why she never had thought of such a thing,—“She seemed so suited to the life.” Grace returned short answers; fancying it were mere affectation of ignorance in Miss Brown, not to know how much Grace had desired it, and how it was stopped.

Joining this with other things, Grace suspected Miss Brown of some underhand motive, and it was a great trouble to her to be obliged constantly to be with a person she durst not trust, and who turned even her most secret and cherished thoughts against her, while pretending to be her friend. It made Grace less scrupulous in following her own inclinations by declining almost always to join the parties to which her stepmother and her niece went. Grace disliked it, and preferred a lonely evening at home. Sometimes it happened that her father came down for an hour, and she fancied, notwithstanding a few scolding words at her sulky preference for her own society, that he was not displeased to find her there. He was much crippled from his late attack, and walked about with pain and difficulty. One evening Grace had been trying over some sacred music. The pianoforte was

much out of tune, but the chords soothed her, besides being dear from old associations. On hearing her father's step and stick, she rather hurriedly shut up the book, and was closing the instrument, when he came into the room.

"Why do you do that? Go on, go on," he said. And Grace overcame her timidity, and forced herself to play on as well as she could.

"When was the instrument tuned?" he asked. And on Grace saying, not for a very long time, for no one had played on it since—she stopped, remembering that Judith's going was the cause; he interrupted her with saying, he used to be a tolerable tuner, and he would see if his ear retained nicety enough to manage it to-morrow.

He spent some time on it, and then was beguiled into a few chords and old chants. From that time the pianoforte proved a point of unison between the father and daughter. She bore his rough criticisms well, and practised diligently to please him; and he in return, now and then, once or twice in a fortnight, perhaps, asked her for music, when he came down, tired out with his own work. Nor did he add his word to his wife's and her niece's, when they upbraided Grace for deserting their parties. Now and then,

just to please them, she went. But generally she was left at home, glad to escape from what gave no pleasure and often caused pain. Yet, at the best, it was but a dull life ; and Grace was young and conscious of powers dormant within her, which now only found a vent in dreams.

CHAPTER XVI.

ANOTHER year has passed ; and so monotonously has each day come and gone, and there is so little to mark the time, that Grace has to think and reckon up.

"Winter is gone at last, and here I am, come to have some delicious rambles with you, Grace," Cecilia said, as she sprang from the carriage, delighted at being allowed to spend a week at Cross Farm.

"It is indeed good to see you—to see anything so bright and so pretty!" said Grace, looking wistfully at her.

"O, I have so much to tell you ! The wedding, and their beautiful new house ; and now

there is Lydia's engagement—two brothers-in-law, and both such good ones! And then I have a great deal to tell you about 'the Home,' and all the money some rich good lady has bequeathed for it! But how are you?—any changes?"

"None. There never is any change here, Cecilia, at least not to me."

"You do look rather dull; but you keep up your good looks, too, Grace. A quiet life is good for beauty, they say."

"If one doesn't grow mouldy, and fall to pieces," said Grace with a dreamy, half sad smile. "I shall be a stupid companion, I fear. I feel growing stupid and dull, and still."

"Poor soul! Surely something will happen! This can't go on for ever."

"I don't see what is to happen," Grace said; "I look for nothing. Only, it is pleasant now and then to reckon up, and find that, though they go so slowly, days have come to months, and a year has passed; and life is only years—one year after another—and then—then—" Grace checked herself: her eyes were bright, and her cheeks flushed.

"Ah, but you are young yet. I will believe that joy will come to you here, Grace. You

have had your sorrow early. To others it comes later: to all some time. I don't know how, but I am certain you won't always be as you are now. People will find you out and appreciate you: something will happen."

"It is my own fault that I don't go into society," Grace said; "such as it is, I am pressed to join in it. My stepmother goes out a good deal. But I don't like it—I prefer my own company; although now and then I force myself to go, fearing I shall grow dumb, if I don't."

"And the music? I was so glad of your playing; and your father—"

"All that is ended; I don't know how, or why. It ended as everything I undertake or try with regard to him always ends. He never comes near me now of an evening, and is angry and mistrustful, though what about I don't know. Mrs. Marks meant kindly, Cecilia; but it was no kindness to me to do as she did. After my solemnly assuring my father I had never seen her, I was quite shocked, the very next time I went to old Stokes', to find her there. No word of mine, after that, would be believed. It ended in my giving up visiting old Stokes, or any of the cottages. I send the

little sewing-work I do for dame Martin by our cow boy ; but even this does not bring me clear of suspicion.”

“ Mrs. Marks is so grieved at it, my dear. Perhaps she is injudicious. Mr. Grant has talked to her about it, and said the good work needed no such partizanship. If it interfered with the good old reading of the Fifth Commandment, it could not prosper or deserve a blessing.”

“ Don’t let us talk of that now. I have decided, Cecilia. The matter is at rest in my mind, until circumstances should entirely change. The little note—only a few words—which reached me from my best friend, our Vicar, written just before he died, they helped me to judge. I knew what he would say. And dull and unprofitable, and useless as my life seems to be, I hope—I hope I am right for the present. It is little enough I can do ; but that little, when it is needed, no one else can do for my father.”

“ If he had ever loved or done you justice,” said Cecilia.

“ That doesn’t alter my duty. But now you are come, I shall take holiday. Isn’t this weather delicious after the long, cold season ? It

has been very unhealthy here,—so many old persons ill and dead!"

"I hear the bell tolling now," Cecilia said, as they strolled up and down the garden walk; "it sounds sad, and yet so sweet here at this distance."

The friends continued to walk and talk, and their ideas took a grave turn, partly, perhaps, from the unconscious influence of that solemn bell, and partly from the sudden burst of spring, after a long, severe winter. It was the end of April now, and this was the first mild day they had. After some time, Grace said,

"I suppose we ought to go in. Mrs. Bracy will have returned from the town. I don't know why it is I dread going into the house so; yet I want to hear tidings of Aunt Betsy, who has been ill."

Slowly and reluctantly they sauntered in, and then found a servant on her way to summon them for tea. News greeted Grace which sent her to her room instead: that solemn bell had tolled for Aunt Betsy! The severe attack of influenza had at last carried her off, taking a very sudden turn just as they thought her getting better.

Little as had been the intercourse between Miss Stafford and Grace of late, since her step-

mother had taken offence and quarrelled, Grace felt that her oldest and best friend was gone,— one always ready to greet her with affection, and give her true and wise advice. For Miss Stafford herself, no one could mourn. She had lived for others; and, as far as her friends could judge, had long been ready for her summons. She left no relations, but many friends, and was long missed in the parish; but perhaps to none more than to her early and now lonely friend, Patty Lee.

Miss Stafford's genial temper melted the frost work which stiffened Miss Lee; while Miss Lee's unflinching firmness had often, in former times, propped up Miss Stafford's too yielding disposition. They were very old and very faithful friends, and Miss Patty Lee was visibly aged through her grief at this loss.

Grace too was so little able to stand a blow, that she sank beneath this in a way to alarm Cecilia, and even attract her father's attention. Finding she did not rally, he at last consented to her paying another visit among her relations, under protest, however, of any attempt at inducing her to become a "Sister."

It was to her newly-married cousin, now Mrs. Cartwright, that Grace went. Cecilia was to be

with her, and hoped for a great deal of pleasure in her sister's new home.

Summer weather did all it could for their enjoyment ; and Captain Cartwright, being at home for some weeks, devoted himself to their service, and was never tired of giving them a row or a sail on the river. Grace revived under the cheerfulness and liveliness of the happiness around her. Only now and then a sigh would escape her, and a sharp thought of regret ; for she saw in her cousin's home just such a happy, loving life, as once she had dreamt of as possible for her. There was Lydia's courtship, too ; and Grace would turn to Cecilia, and half hope her turn would come soon. So pretty and winning as she was, she only wondered that it had not come to pass before.

One day the Captain called up stairs where the young folks were attiring themselves for a sail. He told his wife they must delay it till the afternoon, and she must prepare some luncheon, for he had found some old acquaintances in the town.

"Isn't it provoking !" said Cecilia ; "a lot of men, this lovely hot day : and we were to have had our lunch in the boat. The room will be full, and it is so stifling and hot !"

"Who are they?" said Grace, as she laid aside her bonnet.

"I don't know. Look! here they come! One, two, three, four. Well done, Captain Cartwright! Poor wife to have to feed such a lot all of a sudden. He has so many acquaintances always . . . What is the matter!—I say—Grace!"

She stopped in sudden fright at the sight of Grace's face, which was pale all over, even to her lips. She seized Cecilia's arm, grasping it hard, and she tried to speak, but no sound came.

Meanwhile they both watched Captain Cartwright marshal in his guests. He looked at the window and smiled, and beckoned them down. He had hold of the arm of one of the gentlemen, a tall slight figure, quite a stranger to Cecilia; but he, following the Captain's eye, looked up, and on him too came a change. A look of recognition, of surprise and of pain, flashed up in his eye. He hung behind, too, as Cecilia saw.

"Some one you know! who is it, Grace?"
Don't—don't be ill! What is it, my dear?"

Grace sank into a chair, and pressed her hand on her side. "Nothing, only—pain here. No-

thing, really, Cecilia," she added, trying to smile; "only it is so sudden.—I didn't know he was here. This is folly!" she said, rising. "What is he to me? Nothing: nothing! That is—is Harry Vane, and you see it startled me, that's all, dear."

"Harry Vane! How did he come here? It can't be, Grace!"

Grace shook her head faintly, and smoothed her hair.

"Shall you go down? You don't look fit. Let me bring your luncheon to you, and lie down a little. Do, my dear."

"No, it will be making a fuss. I am sure he saw me. Best face it at once. If he is here, I shall have to meet him, that is all, of course. I had rather go and have it over. Only don't be looking at me, Cecilia, please!"

"You don't look fit to do it," Cecilia observed; but finding Grace resolved, they went down together.

The little room seemed full both of talking and people, when they came in. Cecilia glanced hastily at Grace, and was relieved to see the dreadful paleness succeeded by a bright flush. Captain Cartwright's hearty, "jolly" manner, went far to setting every one at ease.

Harry was next the window, he only bowed to both ladies, as Captain Cartwright named them, then turned and looked out of window again.

The Captain led out Grace when luncheon was announced, and she sat by him ; but it so happened that Harry Vane, who came in last, had to sit on the opposite side, and Cecilia saw that all the paleness had returned. Indeed, she fully expected Grace would faint.

There was much talking, much laughing, and plenty of clatter ; but the Captain paused to pour out a glass of wine, and insist on Grace's drinking it, attributing her ill looks to the heat, and regretting for her sake the delay of the sail. "But," he half turned to Vane as he spoke, "You see I met these fellows. This one (a fellow-townsman, by the way, of yours,) and Lee, are only just arrived from a long voyage. They came in the steamer. The others are old friends of mine, just back from America."

Then he turned to Harry, and questioned him about Australia and his prospects, to Grace's relief, whilst she bent earnestly over her chicken, not daring to look up, only so well understanding each turn of the voice and detecting uneasy displeasure give way gradually to the interest

of the subject, till he got warm in describing his new life.

He came back on business, he said, to see his old father. He left his partner in full charge—and here there was a cold tone imparted to the voice, and a stiffer enunciation as he added—“Your brother, Miss Bracy, was quite well, and very happy. In fact, I dare say he has told you, he is about to be married to a very nice girl.”

She could not speak, she only bowed; and he did not address or look at her again. After a time Grace was distressed by the Captain’s telling his wife, that though sorry to lose their company, he advised the ladies to adjourn; and he gave her a hint to let Miss Bracy lay up a little, if she meant to be fit for the sail.

This brought much sympathy and many questions from Christian, and they left the room in a sort of bustle and confusion Grace did not know how. She was relieved at last, when they left her alone on the bed.

“Weak, foolish, despicable creature, to expose myself so to him!” she cried out; and then as the excitement subsided into sobs, she remembered that he was looking well, only a little browner; but so handsome, only much

graver. And it was all true.—He was both prosperous and good, or he wouldn't return with that look. Well, it would be a pleasure to the poor old father and Miss Lee. So, he wasn't married. Perhaps he would choose a wife here! And hugging this idea, and repeating it over and over again to herself, in order to impress it on her mind, Grace at last got hushed and quiet, and dropped to sleep. She dreamed that she was running after Harry through a thick and dark wood, never coming up to him, never catching him, though often near. She started up in dismay as her cousin came in gently on tiptoe, to see if she was ready for the sail.

“They are all gone, and it is a beautiful evening.”

* * . * * *

Grace was urged to prolong her visit, and got leave from home to do so. The same note from her step-mother spoke of the stir in the town on the return of young Mr. Vane. The bells had rung a peal, and there was a dinner and a ball, and every one giving parties and making an absurd fuss—so Mrs. Bracy thought, as she had not been invited to any of these parties, and no communication had taken place between them and the Vanes. “He had not even had the

good manners to call and tell Mr. Bracy of his son."

Grace understood it all. The soreness and resentment only increased by the bad terms John was on with his father. She was thankful to be out of it, to avoid the home comments and the chance of meeting him or even Miss Lee's look of triumph. She wished she could hide herself away somewhere; and yet she could not but be glad to hear of honour paid him; to think that instead of being "that idle young fellow who would come to no good," he was leading a steady life, and bestowing his energy and powers on rightful things.

So Grace was thankful for the offer of remaining longer with her kind friends. And they were pleased to see the paleness did not return, but that she looked stronger and better every day.

CHAPTER XVII.

"I HAVE asked young Vane and William Bury to come over and join our pic-nic on Thursday,"

said the Captain to his wife. "We have one spare bed, and they will lend one at home, won't they? We want hands for the oars, and they are pleasant fellows, and will enjoy the fun."

No one made any objection. When Cecilia reported it to Grace, she answered quietly, "All right," and let it drop, as if indifferent.

He was only to stay three months in England, and part of that time must be in London; so an end would come, and she must teach herself to endure the pain. But it was harder to forget than even she had thought, and it was great pain to feel how sore and angry he was. If they had parted otherwise—but as it was, he blamed her much, and never would forgive her. Perhaps too she had been over hasty and severe. Perhaps—but she didn't know—if it was to do again she should act differently. It was one comfort to find that he had not suffered very much, only for the first moment.

He was looking well and happy, and every one spoke of his being so agreeable and thoughtful. All the Banks party were greatly taken with him. Though changed in some respects, she thought it was for the better. She had not driven him to despair. He had forgotten her, except the angry feeling revived by seeing her

again. He would marry, and perhaps some day look back on that time as the turning point, bitter and sharp, yet healing.

So she tried to reason ; but all her quiet sense and subdued temper would not avail against the fluttering of the heart and the alternate flushing and paling which came on, the day she was again to see him. Very busy she was all the morning, begging for all the work of packing and preparation ; and Cecilia understood it, and allowed her to take it.

Christian said Grace would be knocked up before starting ; she had not sat down or rested the whole morning, and now it was just eleven, and the boats were ready. Where were the Heathercombe guests ?

They waited a little, and then it was proposed for them all to go on but the Captain and his wife. There were to be two boats, and four oars in each. It was a merry and expectant party, that assembled on the quay behind Mr. Banks' house. The boats were decked out with gay flags, the sun shone, and the water was smooth as satin. There was a moon too, and the tides served to a minute.

" Grace, you will go in father's boat, won't you ?" said Cecilia.

Grace expressed herself as ready any way ; but she soon discovered Cecilia's motive, when she heard the rowers told off.

Mr. Banks, Mr. Grant, (an old Oxford oar,) William, and Mr. Rede, were for the first boat, in which Grace found herself seated, beside Lydia, and her aunt, and some of the little ones. They put off before the others did, for the Heathercombe gentlemen were not yet arrived.

" If they don't appear soon, Cartwright will hire a couple of men," Mr. Banks said, but in ten minutes' time, there was a cry, " there they are—they will overtake us now ! "

Mr. Banks shook his head at any racing. They were a stronger crew, and a lighter boat, and if they chose to pass they might. This they soon did in gallant style. There was Capt. Cartwright, Harry Vane, William Bury, and a Mr. Cornish. A passing greeting was given, and they kept ahead for some time.

Grace was delighted at the scenery, the widening river, and the small shipping village, picturesquely standing on a hill, and running out on a long tongue of land. On they went till the river became almost sea, past a small bathing place, to a cluster of rocks, with a broad stretch of firm yellow sand. Here they were to

land, and carrying their dinner a short way up, they found shade and a small trickling rill of fresh water. It was a place, as they all said, made for a pic-nic, and every one was in a bright and merry mood. So Grace thought, who feeling just a little tired with her morning's work, and somewhat sleepy as she said, from the sea air, sat still and quiet in a shady corner, where Cecilia placed her, watching the others, and feeling as if she was only a looker-on, and was not an actor in the scene.

It was pleasant to see the quiet assured pleasure of her uncle and aunt, to watch Capt. Cartwright's hilarious spirits, but ever constant and tender care for his little wife. Then Lydia, usually so high-spirited and full of fun, had become quiet, though she looked very happy with Mr. Rede near her. There was a young lady, a distant cousin of the Banks, called Nora Gay, too, who took Grace's fancy. She compared her with Cecilia, and wondered which people would think the prettier of the two. She guessed what her Cousin William thought, and was amused to watch his quiet endeavours to get a place by Nora, who didn't particularly encourage him, but rather smiled more on Mr. Bury.

Cecilia was looking lovely and so surely Harry Vane thought. He was so much with her, and so often glanced at her face, as they were talking very earnestly together. A sudden sharp pang seemed to shoot through Grace then. Many times afterwards she turned to look that way. He had not once looked even at her. Only that first general bow of greeting from the boat.

"You have stuck yourself so far away there!" said Capt. Cartwright. "There is no getting at you at all. Won't you have some of this excellent cold plum pudding? It is orthodox."

She smiled, and took some, and said she had a capital place, and was very comfortable and that her little cousins had been most attentive.

Later some fruit was handed about, Harry Vane rising to do it. He gave some to every one.

"You have forgotten Grace," said her uncle. It was difficult to reach her from where Harry stood, so Mr. Banks took the basket and helped her. Then Harry returned to his seat, which chanced to be with his back to Grace, so that she could only catch a glimpse of his profile, as he bent down to his companion. Songs were

asked for. Mr. Bury sang, and then urged Vane to do so. He gave an old favourite—one he used to sing years ago. It was funny, but his rich voice gave a quaint pathos to the ever-recurring melody, and the chorus rang with touching wildness, increased by some of the others joining in harmony. It suited the scene, for it spoke of the sea. There was fun for the merry, and feeling for the more sentimental. It was much approved, and as he refused to repeat it, saying it took out all the spirit, no more songs were cared for.

Very soon, the younger members were ready to explore, and search for shells or cockles. Some said there was a famous cavern, which must be seen, and one or two preferred remaining quietly in the shade. They paired off naturally, Grace being left in her corner, and her aunt and uncle on either side; Mr. Grant too, had leant back, and seemed indisposed to move.

"Grace, won't you go? You ought to see the cavern, my dear," presently said her aunt. "Or are you tired? Only it is a pity not to see it. They have forgotten you!"

Grace bent her face for one short minute, then looked up and answered cheerfully, that

she was very happy where she was. But Mr. Grant insisted on taking charge of her, and would take no refusal. At last she yielded, not without a certain feeling of reluctance, and taking his offered arm they went the shortest cut to the cavern, which it seemed the others had not done, but were, some making a circuit in one direction, some in another, and one or two had gone in quite a contrary direction.

He was very agreeable and talked of the "Home." "Well, Miss Bracy, you are often asked after by the Sisters. I tell them you have other work to do, but I hope you have not dropped all interest in us, that not once you have even visited the place?"

"My father expects me not to go there. Indeed, Mr. Grant, if my interest is not so much expressed, or so warm, it is, because I have found it my duty and necessary to check it. Whether things may ever change, or I may find myself free to choose, God knows! I don't know—can't guess even. Perhaps some time hence, when I am older, wiser, more proved—I may be able to offer if they will then accept me. Is it wrong to look to this?"

"I should prefer in your case, not to build on it at all. You know how deeply I have this

work at heart, and yet I know that under certain circumstances there may be a higher path. Should a time ever come when you are quite free, this trial will not have rendered you less fitted for it."

Grace only sighed. "I can't look forward to old age. The present is quite as much as I can bear. Old age!—Who can desire a long life?"

"It is not unnatural to do so. But you have been weighed down with cares. Are things no better, Grace? I hoped they might be."

He spoke kindly, and Grace was led to speak a little of her home and her anxieties.

"Cecilia is my first and chief pleasure. To her I owe all my happy moments," she added eagerly.

"She is a good girl—very." Mr. Grant pronounced the words slowly—almost reluctantly. "I trust she is not so light—so volatile as sometimes she appears to be. She is much admired naturally. May it not be a snare to her!"

Then as silence followed, he asked if Grace knew anything of young Vane. Was he a good character, and so on? Wondering, she glanced at his face, as he seemed to study the stones on

which they walked. He was grave, anxious perhaps, but certainly innocent of all under-motive. He had not heard of her former connection with Harry, so she took courage and answered freely,

"I believe he is good. He always had the best heart in the world ; but his bringing up was bad.—Too great strictness and indulgence mixed. He got into bad society at one time, and was rather wild. He had some grief and then went to Australia, and has done well there. He is now returned, I fully believe, to see his old father, and make his peace with him. They parted under a cloud, and that I am sure Harry could not endure."

"You knew him well then?"

"O yes.—My brother is now his partner," she added.

"He will not return alone I think. Perhaps he had a double motive in coming home. Did your cousins know him too?" asked Mr. Grant.

"No ! this is their first introduction through Captain Cartwright, who seems to know every one."

"You see what I mean, I am sure. I saw your eyes bent that way more than once," he added.

"I can't pretend to misunderstand you," she answered. "I confess the same idea did cross me. But though very probable—very, very likely, it is very early for us to be so settling it, the second time of their meeting!" They both laughed a little and then turned to another subject.

Of course they were at the cavern long before any one else. It was more curious than beautiful, and Grace did not feel tempted to explore its dark hollow, but preferred looking around at the wide spread scene, combining country fields, and hamlets, and here and there a church tower, with the sea, and then to the left the river winding up between the coast lines, and dotted over with boats and larger vessels. The whole toned down by the lengthening shadows and the reddening glow of the western sky. Outside the "bar" a large-sized brig was waiting for the tide to bring her in. Opposite they were at work unloading a coal sloop, which rested now on nearly dry land, and showed a busy, lively scene, in the various carts passing to and fro, and the many people at work, with the monotonous song used in heaving up the heavy coal from the hold.

"Shipping is certainly very picturesque, but I

shouldn't at all like a long voyage—such as to Australia for instance," observed Mr. Grant.

Grace smiled. "I can fancy it very bearable—and—might it not possibly be one's duty?"

"Possibly—yes." And Grace thought that his rather searching eye questioned her face. But changing into a lighter tone Mr. Grant went on.

"I knew some friends who sailed just as they were married. They were both so miserably ill, that they did not exchange six words for the first four weeks. Nothing, I think, can make it very pleasant under such circumstances."

"I dare say it is very dreadful if one is a bad sailor. But I think I have fancied I should like to find myself on the real deep ocean. Only of course, fancying it while snug on *terra firma*, is a very different thing from really being there."

"Here they are at last!" Mr. Grant said. Harry Vane and Cecilia came up first. She was delighted to see Grace, having reproached herself for not bringing her.

"I was more successful, you see, Miss Banks."

Cecilia went up close to Grace, asking if she had been into the cavern.

"We were talking very busily discussing the

pleasures or the miseries of a voyage," said Mr. Grant.

Harry gave a quick look towards Grace, but her face was turned away. "Well, do you wish to try one?" he said to Mr. Grant.

"I? No thank you! But I fancy Miss Bracy has some idea on the subject"

"Shall we explore this dark place now?" Grace said, speaking hurriedly and with a flushed face.

Of course Mr. Grant was ready, and offered to go first and feel the way.

"Ah, it is very awful!" said Cecilia following him. "I never would come in before. Hold by me, Grace dear, it is so rough!"

They crept on till it got very narrow and low.

"Are you inclined to creep?" called out Mr. Grant.

"O no! I can't—I would rather go back!" said Cecilia.

She turned, or tried to do so, suddenly; Grace tried to step back out of her way, but her foot being on a loose stone, it slipped and she fell, partly against the rough and jagged side of the cave, and partly against Harry Vane, who was following at his leisure, and had not heard Mr. Grant's question.

"Where are you? What is it, Grace?" said Cecilia.

"Please move on, good people, or my back will break," said Mr. Grant.

Grace gave a little groan, as she strove to regain her footing, startled and bruised as she felt.

"Are you hurt?" said Harry, at the same time, catching her arm. This saved a second fall, for her foot gave way and would not support her.

"It is my ankle, I think," she said faintly.

"Are you hurt, Grace?" said her cousin.

"Yes, she is hurt," answered Harry; and he half lifted, half supported her, till they again reached the mouth of the cave and saw daylight.

Grace was deadly pale and shivered. Her arm was bleeding.

"What is it?" exclaimed Mr. Grant coming up.

"Will you help her, Mr. Grant?" said Harry, apparently eager to give up his charge. "Miss Bracy will prefer your arm, I am sure," he added. "And I will fetch some water." Off he was in a moment, and Grace felt "he shuddered even at my touch; he can't forgive me at all!"

Presently the Captain and his wife, the young ones and Miss Gay, and Mr. Bury came up, and every one had an exclamation of surprise and pity, and a suggestion to make. Grace was faint from the pain. She begged to be laid down somewhere, and asked Cecilia, in piteous tones, to beg all to go and amuse themselves.

"Quiet would restore her; only don't let them all stand and look and talk."

So Cecilia ordered them all off, and the Captain hastened to the boats to rig out some sort of litter, seeing very clearly she would not be able to walk. The others went into the cave, resolved to penetrate to the real hall, which, it was said, might be reached with perseverance. Many an old tale of smugglers was connected with the spot. Their merry voices died away as they got further under ground. The two girls were alone.

"Are you better, Grace?"

"Rather! only my foot! I wonder if it is out of joint; it pains much. How I wish I was at home! I think I am not meant for pleasure parties. See what a spoil-sport I am!"

Cecilia sat by her, laughing at and encouraging her. "Here he comes!" she said presently.

"Who?" asked Grace, without opening her eyes.

"Mr. Vane."

"Do you like him, Cecilia?"

"Like him? Why do you ask?"

"I'll tell you by and by—not now—he is here."

"She is better now; but the foot is very bad. She cannot walk back. I wish father was here to carry her."

Harry handed the water to Cecilia, and she bathed Grace's brow and hands with it.

"There can be no sort of difficulty about conveying Miss Bracy. We can form a sedan, or—or—any one of us could easily carry her; but if you prefer it, I will fetch Mr. Banks. Shall I?"

"No, I'll try to walk; with an arm, I may limp it," she said, making a great effort to rise up, and feeling so shaken and so sick, she would have been glad to have been in bed.

"You can't do it, Grace. See, it has made her faint again! This is the only and the quickest way. Excuse me." And biting his lips, he stooped and lifted Grace, her slight figure seeming a mere nothing in his strong arms.

She kept her eyes shut. They thought her still fainting. Cecilia followed, finding it hard work to keep up with his rapid steps. They met Captain Cartwright with a litter formed of shawls strung on the oars.

But Harry did not put her down till the place in the boat was ready, that "she might not be moved more than needful," he said. Having placed her, he turned quickly away, leaving Cecilia and her mother to minister to her comfort and adjust the pillow. He did not rejoin the others; but, while waiting for them, he paced up and down on the sand. Then he lighted a cigar, and seeing Cecilia step ashore again and go to the rocks for some wrappers, he followed her. They two had fetched and disposed of all the traps before the rest returned. They were wild with joy at their success, and had found an enchanted hall—just like a fairy tale, they declared.

Grace was in great pain, and her aunt dipped some handkerchiefs into water, and kept on the foot. She hurried the departure by signs. But no one had seen Lydia and Mr. Rede. Then it was settled for one boat to go on, the other to wait.

"Luckily it is the lighter craft of the two,"

Harry remarked, "and our crew are the best performers ; so we had better make way with all speed. The sooner *that*," and he nodded towards poor Grace's foot, "is under medical treatment, the better."

He stripped off his coat as he spoke, and the others followed his example. Very soon the boat was spinning along very fast ; but it was a sad and quiet home-coming. They did not see the moon, and there was no song, as had been promised.

There was great difficulty in taking poor Grace out, and she was too bad to return to the Cartwrights', but was placed in bed at her uncle's house.

The night was spent in pain, accompanied with fever ; in which she grew a little delirious, and talked oddly, begging Harry not to leave her so unkindly. Luckily, none but her aunt was there to hear ; and Aunt Cissy knew too much of Grace's troubles to be surprised, or to take any notice.

She was in bed for some days, tended most lovingly and kindly by all, chiefly by Aunt Cissy and Cecilia. They told her that many inquiries were made daily. Mr. Grant called often, and Mrs. Marks brought fruit and flowers.

"I thought I heard a merry party, as the door opened. Who was it, Cecilia?"

"There was John Rede, of course, and Nora had come in; and then Mr. Bury and Mr. Vane walked over to know how you were: so the room was full."

Aunt Cissy added further information when she took Cecilia's place.

"There is to be a very large pic-nic party of Heathercombe people, given principally by Mr. Vane, and he asks all our party."

"And they will go?"

"I don't know; your uncle doubts, as most of them are strangers. But the young folks are very eager, and Captain Cartwright takes their side. I dare say it will be yes. Young Vane has a winning way with him. My dear, I hope you will be able to join; it is a week hence, and you can go in the carriage."

Grace shook her head: she didn't much wish it. After all, it was no use to get a taste for the sort of thing; and she was not suited to gay parties. No one else would have been so awkward as to spoil all the fun the other day. And so on.

Aunt Cissy scolded her for being gloomy, and liked young folks to be cheerful. Time enough

to be grave and dismal. Grace made no answer ; but she asked Aunt Cissy to go down for tea. She liked being alone a little ; and she should very much like, if no one minded, having both doors open. It was pleasant to hear the hum of voices, and there might be some singing.

She lay there with the lovely flowers Mrs. Marks had brought her from the Home. She had lent her books, too ; but she did not feel inclined to read. She better liked to try and distinguish tones, and to see if she recognised any one voice.

How merry they were ! That was Uncle Hugh's quiet, rather measured and pompous speaking. How every one hushed to listen ! That was pleasing respect, such as the young should pay to their elders.

But whose voice was that, low and clear, high-pitched, and ending in a laugh. Was it Cecilia, or Christian ?

Then came one, followed by a chorus ; but that one she well knew. All through the confusion she could trace it ; now lower and graver, now higher and more earnest. Whom was he addressing ? whose face was he smiling at ? Then came a pause, a little stir, and the sound of a springing light step.

"Will it disturb you, Grace, if we play and sing? Tell the truth," said Cecilia.

"The very thing I was wishing for! And Cecilia, do, if you can, will you? only don't say I wished it, please, sing the glee, 'When shall we three meet again?' and the 'Land of the Leal.'"

"Oh, you fix on such very dismal ones! But I'll try what can be done." And down she went again.

There were one or two airs and marches played first by Lydia and Christian. Then a simple little song by Nora Gay. That was followed by a loud, ambitious performance in some man's voice. Grace could not make out who. Then a pause, a murmur as of doubts and persuasion, and then came her favourite "When shall we three meet again?"

Mr. Grant, Cecilia, and Harry Vane: she knew beforehand who was likely to undertake it. He had not lost his singing. If anything his voice had gained in sweetness and power. She was sorry when it was over. She dreaded hearing anything else; but at last, after some doubtful random chords, Cecilia began "The Land of the Leal," and then broke down. She was supported by another. Again his rich tenor

blended with her sweet but rather thin treble, and tears blinded Grace before the last notes had died away. Thoughts which could find no words, half wishes which dared not find expression, came to her then.

“ That land would be reached at last—at last. Long and rough was the way ; but one day it would seem as a tale that is told. Courage ! hold still in the LORD. Commit thy way unto Him and He shall bring it to pass !”

These words of comfort stole over her, and before Aunt Cissy came to say good-night, and see she had all her comforts at hand, Grace’s voice was quiet and calm. She could smile happily, and say the music had done her good, and she had quite enjoyed the treat. It suited her better than being one of the party. They need not pity her. Aunt Cissy blessed her, and wished her good-night, hoping the young ones would not keep her awake, but they seemed no ways inclined to part. She observed to her brother and his wife, when she went down, that she had found Grace looking more like an angel than anything else, quite wrapt up and delighted at the music. But she did not like that look—that patient sweet smile. It was not earthly enough. She would sooner

see her fretful or hasty, and aunt cautioned them not to keep her awake, and went her way home.

Cecilia just peeped softly in later, and finding her cousin awake, could not help coming close to say good-night. Such a pleasant evening. Those two walked back now. Lovely moonlight and she envied them. Yes, it was settled, they were to go to the pic-nic, and Grace must get well. Mr. Vane was quite excited about the party, and had told her in secret, that he should get a band. So you must come, you see, Grace. You were wishing for a band the other day."

"I am better here. No one will miss me," Grace half-whispered. At which Cecilia pinched her finger, and said she was very unkind to say so, when every one wanted her, and there was every one calling to know how she was and making such a fuss!

"A convenient excuse, isn't it, Cecilia?" said Grace laughing. "But," she added, "I shall be glad to go if able, were it only to see you once more. You see my time is quite up, and I must go home as soon as possible now."

CHAPTER XVIII.

GRACE did not go to the pic-nic. Her father had another rheumatic attack, and she travelled home that very day, taking a seat in one of the carriages, which went a little out of the way to put her down at her own door. It was a disappointment. She did not pretend to hide it. But the summons was from her father. Nothing but sheer inability would induce her to neglect instant compliance. Whether Mr. Bracy knew what his daughter gave up, she did not know. He made no remark and asked no question, not even though he must have observed her lameness. Miss Brown had contrived to get an invitation, and went with the Burys. Mrs. Bracy was out of humour at not being of the party, but did not quite like to leave her husband entirely to Grace, of whom she had lately taken it into her head to be jealous.

She contrived to spoil any possible comfort or satisfaction which Grace might have had with her father, and worried him by complaints of the servants. She made some sharp and stinging observations about Grace's visit, her gaiety, and Harry Vane's attentions to one of the ladies.



which she said had been talked of all over Heathercombe. The Burys had asked her if there was any engagement—their brother thought it could be no less.

Grace answered all this with as much dignity and indifference as she could show. She feared its effect on her father, in whose presence these rumours were repeated. When his wife left the room, he startled Grace by saying, "So young Vane is come back, boasting of his wealth and fine prospects it seems. Old Vane's head is turned, poor old fellow. The rich son is a paragon. Well, and do you mean to take the voyage? How do you relish five months on board ship?"

Grace opened her eyes wide, then blushed painfully. At last she said in a very low, hurt voice,

" You shouldn't say that, father. You know I broke it all off. We have scarcely exchanged a word or a look."

"Indeed! ay, ay! he is sore. 'Tis his turn to take the upper hand now. Well, well, it is natural. But if he is inclined to come round, it is for your interest to meet him half way. I give you a hint because you are very likely at my death to find yourself a beggar. Keep

this news to yourself, but act accordingly. If you have a chance of providing yourself a home, don't neglect it. You understand?"

"Yes."

Then she tried to amuse her father by describing what she had seen, and spoke of the prosperity and happiness of the Banks family.

"Yes, he was always a prudent, far-seeing man, matter-of-fact and dull, and a creeping creature, who knew how to make a good nest."

Mr. Bracy was in one of his bitter and sarcastic moods, and everything Grace mentioned was sneered at in the same way, till her heart failed, and the old depressed cheerless feeling crept over her. Then she strove to rally herself. "If my own mind was worth anything, it would be sufficient in itself to feed itself. But here I am, just as dependent on others' light as ever. If they are dark, so am I, and I only seem lighted up and bright by others' light."

Miss Brown gave a wonderful account the next morning of the grand party. The excellent arrangements, the beauty of the view, and the pleasant rambling walks, and best of all, the excellent band, the dancing, the singing, and the return by moonlight. Never was such a party. She spoke of the Banks, who mustered

very strong. Miss Cecilia was thought very pretty, but she was a sad little flirt, and made herself very conspicuous with the gentlemen.

"With any one in particular?" Grace asked.

"O yes, with Mr. Vane the younger. Every one talked of it; though it is true he was very agreeable and attentive to every one."

Mrs. Bracy carried this news to her husband, and he was very crusty with Grace all day, and threw out many hints at her bad management, and that she would have to work for herself. Her foot was too bad yet to allow of her walking; but she got out as far as the orchard to sit for half an hour. Her late visit then seemed like one of the past dreams of her life. It was difficult to believe that Harry Vane was actually at Heathercombe. Perhaps had she been about as usual, she might have chanced to meet him some day in the Green Lane, which she so often passed. She was almost thankful for her sprain, which put that out of the question. What would such a meeting bring, but pain and awkwardness to either of them? As it was, she did not go beyond the garden, and as he did not come there, they had little or no chance of even meeting again. She thought she should like to have seen him once more—knowing it to be the

last time—and to have heard him sing once again! Would it be, that Cecilia married him! If so—and it looked likely and probable—she might, perhaps, even for Cecilia's sake, see him once, to wish them happiness, and say farewell. Tears surprised her, as she went on thinking. She did not know she had shed them, till she felt her hand wet.

It would not do for her to be loitering away in this manner, thinking idle thoughts, exhausting her strength. She must be up and at work. No matter what! Then it came across her—Aunt Betsy is gone. How many must miss her. If she could but take her place to some few. Her father must begin to trust her—to give her more liberty. She had been weak in yielding so very much. Poor Miss Lee! People said she had much aged and failed of late. Only she had revived at her darling's return. Grace would like to go and sit with her. She should not mind her little sharp speeches now. She could bear all her triumph, and love her the better for it. But she could not go there unasked just now. She must wait till he was gone.

Then she resolved to try and make friends with Miss Lee, and perhaps make some of her time a little less lonely for her. That was

a pleasant thought to encourage. It did Grace good. She was like some frail climbing plant, throwing out tendrils, and gladly catching at any support clinging round it; there was strength to bring out leaf and bud—without it there was nothing but to trail on the ground, at the risk of being crushed and destroyed.

Mr. Bracy got over this attack very soon, and before Grace could dispense with a stick, he was also limping with the help of one, by her side, in the favourite garden walk. He inquired if she had heard from her cousins. She was surprised at the question, and said no. Every day she had looked for a note.

"Too gay, I suppose. Out of sight out of mind."

Grace tried to contradict this, but as the days came and went, and no letter or message came, she did not like the look in her father's face.

It was strange his taking any interest in it. Altogether she felt a change in his manner towards her. He was crusty and ungracious—sarcastic too; but he talked more, asked more questions, and seemed to wish to understand her mind. One day he said, "Are you fond of your brothers?"

"Yes," she said. "But she did not think they were of her. Robert she knew best."

"They would like you if they were wise. I shouldn't wonder if you had a home with one of them."

Again he said: "Did you meet young Harris when you were at Fordbridge. Oh! I thought you might; and sometimes second thoughts are best. You were not wise there, Grace. Women are absurdly romantic, and cherish ghosts of a feeling for a real live thing, letting the real thing escape them. Not that I think matrimony indispensable. By no means. Had I to begin life again, I should be inclined to eschew it. Women are fools to marry; but they will be fools to the end of the world—what of it?"

"Are you cold, father?" Grace asked presently, seeing him grow pale and shiver.

"Yes, I am not well. A strange sensation in my left side. Perhaps I am cold; I will move on."

He rose and took a few steps and then stopped, drawn together by a sudden spasm of pain. Grace was alarmed! his countenance looked so strange. She beckoned to a man working within sight, and together they got him home. He was put into bed, and the doctor summoned. Consider-

able agony came on—a time of miserable suffering—in which no help could be given. It was a dreadful night! Towards morning he fell asleep. He awoke to look round wildly, and asked for Grace. She was there.

“Tell John I wish him well, and beg him to take care of you—Robert—Judith—the little ones.”

His wife here came in, and seeing his altered face burst into strong hysterical crying. He signed for her to go. The doctor himself removed her.

“Grace,” he said—“Grace! I have been hard to you; pray now for me, I can hear you.”

Grace bent her head and prayed. She asked for God’s mercy and help, and pleaded the Love and Passion of the Redeemer. Words came with no effort. Thanks to old church habits and accustomed words, familiar from childhood. When “Amen” had been said she looked up, and saw that all was over.

They led her away.

The doctor said the heart had been some time affected. Mr. Bracy’s constitution had been long injured. It seemed very sudden: but awful as it was, Grace had no leisure for her own thoughts. On her devolved all the work. She had to order

and arrange, to overlook accounts, and provide for all. The little children were brought back,—so altered, so changed, and so shy, that it was wretched work to see them. Mrs. Bracy locked herself up, and gave way alternately to violent bursts of grief, and then to long intervals of sleeping. Grace with the two elder children followed their father to his grave. She was thankful to see Uncle Hugh and Aunt Cissy there. Their very presence was a support. There appeared to be a great many followers, but Grace did not clearly know about it, or see anything but the black pall, which swung in the breeze; and every toll of that bell seemed to tell its own tale. Her eyes were dry. She had not shed a tear. Hers was not the common grief of a mourning child. She was full of thoughts, quiet and still with awe, yet feeling immensely thankful at heart,—so glad she had never left or disobeyed him. She was with him in his hour of need. God had heard and granted her prayer! It seemed to give her new life—new strength to meet whatever should come.

“It was gratifying to see so many townspeople there,” Aunt Cissy observed to Grace afterwards

—for she and her brother agreed to spend as long a day as they could. “I noticed several. Mr. Vane and his son were close behind your uncle and me, and Miss Lee too; she joined us at church. She is looking very sadly and much altered, poor Miss Lee!”

The lawyer said that Mr. Banks was left executor, and an early day was appointed for reading the will and looking into the affairs. Grace expressed her conviction that things were much involved, and repeated some of the hints her father had dropped. Mr. Banks did not seem surprised. People had known of heavy losses and failures in some speculations, and were even wondering how Mr. Bracy managed to keep things going as he did. Aunt Cissy's farewell was even more tender than usual. She said whatever happened Grace had a home ready with her, and prophesied that things would turn out better than was expected.

CHAPTER XIX.

A GREAT stillness brooded over the place. Men had left work; the breeze had died away,

and scarcely a sound could be heard. In the house every voice had been hushed and foot-fall softened, because Mrs. Bracy had a very severe headache, and wanted quiet and sleep. The children were in bed, tired out by being all day in the sun. Grace sat on a garden bench in the front grass plat. An old grey cat, somewhat of a favourite of her father's, glided in its noiseless way by her, and then on to the orchard to seek for game. A heavy beetle whizzed close to her face, and a large moth settled on a verbena near.

Grace was wrapt in the quiet, rural beauty of the scene. It was a pretty place. She was thinking of the time they first came here. There was not much of pleasure to find in the retrospect. Grace felt that altogether she was happier now, in spite of losses. She was stronger, more hopeful. She knew that her fears were true. Her uncle had seen enough of Mr. Bracy's affairs to find, that when all bills were paid, little or nothing would remain. This place must be let or sold. This was the last summer she should sit there, or wander in the pleasant orchard.

She turned and looked at the house. It was unpretending but pretty, with its irregular roof

and added wings; giving many corners and a depth of shadow, which showed well on such a clear, soft evening. The front was half-covered by creeping roses and clematis. There was rich abundance of flowers everywhere. It looked like a home.

Who would next live there? What manner of people would sit where she was? and so on. Dreamy speculations, half-shapen plans, blended with old regrets and memories. She was startled very much by hearing a footstep. It paused—then sounded again. She felt it draw nearer and nearer. Grace was nervous, and a sudden fit of foolish fear seized her.

It might be a beggar. They often found their way in.

There was no fear; yet she trembled, and dared not stir for some moments.

“Good evening,” at last said a voice, which caused Grace to turn suddenly, though she recognized not the person who stood there, half in the deep shade, and veiled and shawled.

“Do you want any one?” Grace said.

“I want you—you, Grace Bracy. Do you mean to say you don’t know me?” and a hollow, mocking laugh sounded.

“Is it possible! O, Judith! are you come at

last?" And Grace held out her hands and advanced.

"Why—did you expect me? Why do you say at last? Who ever wished for me—or cared to see me?"

"We did—I did—father did! But O, Judith!"

"I am too late! you would say. I know it. I saw his coffin pass. I have stood by the grave. I don't owe him anything, for his temper drove me to my fate. We had a bad bringing up. I don't know why I came now: something brought me to the place. I hear you are all beggars. Poor Grace, you have done badly: still unmarried; still a drudge and slave! Well, when I am inclined to fret and be discontented, I must think of you. My lot is not over bright, either."

"Where do you live? Judith! if you did but know the fears I have had—the horrors! Tell me, are you happy—settled—married—?"

"Don't ask such a string of questions, I am not come to gossip. Suffice it to say, I am provided for, and alive. Perhaps by daylight you might find me altered: but see, look here, by this light I am to be recognized!" and drawing back her thick veil she looked Grace in the face.

It was the same regular, handsome face, but with a half wistful, half mocking look in the eyes. She coldly resisted all Grace's attempts to touch her or to come in. She had wished very strongly to look at the place again ; and stealing in she had seen Grace, and so could not resist speaking. She could not stay : she was about to leave England at once.

No, she wouldn't give any address. It would be no pleasure or advantage to Grace to know about her.

Grace asked if she was content and happy ? —was she alone ?—couldn't she stay a little while ?

Judith said she was happy enough,—as much so as others were, take it all together. She was not alone ; she had friends even in the lane ; she must not wait.

As Grace forced a kiss on her, and pressed her in trembling excitement, Judith whispered, “I wish I had seen him ! If he had only wished for me, asked for me—but—”

“He did ! he did ! The last words almost were—Judith—John—Robert ! He remembered all—all. He was sorry ; he grieved ! You were always his favourite. O, Judith !”

But even as Grace wept and uttered these

words from her heart, Judith disengaged herself and was gone. Grace thought she heard the sound of wheels and a horse's steps. That was the last she ever saw of her sister. Years after she heard of her, sad, painful words, that brought sorrow and grief into a happy spot.

Surely, Grace thought, as she went to bed, there are not many such families as ours has been. What was it? What was the cause of all the misery? Was it because God was not first? And trying to ascertain where the mischief was, Grace lost herself in sleep.

There came a letter from Cecilia full of kindness, wanting her to come to them as soon as possible; then, anticipating objections on her part, Cecilia went on to propose that she should accompany her father the next time he went to Cross Farm on business, and leave Cecilia there for a few days. She should like to see the place again; and she was strong and active, and might help Grace.

She went on to say, that of course all their little spirit of gaiety had subsided. They were very quiet now, and Lydia looking melancholy at the prospect of losing Mr. Rede for a time. There was also an ominous sound of an approaching voyage. What would become of them

all when Cartwright left? The two Heathercombe gentlemen were very constant in their visits, and really they both gained an acquaintance. Cecilia said they all liked Mr. Vane, and they were whispering many remarks about Mr. Bury and a certain Nora Gay.

This letter cheered Grace from its tender, unobtrusive kindness. But it only served to confirm her own ideas and others' rumours. That Cecilia would go out as Harry Vane's wife, Grace had no doubt. It was hard to lose her, her best, her only friend; yet she dared not object or repine. She ought to be unselfish and rejoice for both. Poor Grace! She tried hard to do so; and much to her credit was it, that not once, by word written, spoken, or implied by look, did she ever insinuate her own suspicions, so as to make it disagreeable to her friend, or with the chance of utterly breaking down the whole affair, which nineteen times out of twenty such words do, and perhaps are often purposely intended to do, by our so-called "friends." After all, there are but few really noble and generous hearts in the world. They are very generous and kind about many things; but wait a little, and when the proof comes—the point on which their tender part is even

touched, and see how they turn under professing friendship and frankness and say stinging, wounding, shaming words !

Grace loved Cecilia well ; admired and loved her, and was grateful to her. Even on this one, sore, tender subject, she spared her friend. She saw, suspected, felt, but kept silence.

At this time Grace received another letter. It also gave her pleasure. It was from Mrs. Marks, apologising for what she had found to be unseemly haste on her part. Glad she was, that she had been better advised. She confessed her brother had been the best judge.

Still circumstances were changed ; and while she fully acknowledged that Grace had been wiser than herself, she would not for any false shame withhold the offer of a safe and happy home for her, in case she should now or hereafter think herself free to accept it. In the name of the institution and its members she begged to say, she would be gladly welcomed there on *any terms*.

Grace was thankful for this. It helped her on. Perhaps after all there she should be. She thanked her, but craved further patience and time.

CHAPTER XX.

CECILLIA's promised visit was paid. She was there at the first turning out some of the rooms and packing up of furniture. Her gladsome ways turned the toil into a work of pleasure. Her bright spirit was shed on all, and gave it a light not its own. It uplifted Grace, and seemed to realise some old fancies of her own, only Cecilia turned common trifles of daily life by some magic of her own, instead of waiting for an imaginary set of circumstances.

It was found that after all debts were cleared, there remained £2000 settled on the children; it evidently meant the four younger, though it was not clearly expressed whether or no it included Grace: and the estate and house of Cross Farm, the furniture and plate, and his scientific inventions, some of them still unfinished, might prove worth something; and one had a patent not yet expired. This residue of his property was for his wife. Some gifts of remembrance, such as his watch, desk, and some books were left to each child by name.

Mrs. Bracy deplored and grumbled, saying at least she expected to live on at Cross Farm;

but Mr. Banks pointed out to her that the sum for which it would let would be her principal means of support. So there was nothing to be done but to try and clear out everything as soon as possible, and to advertise the place without delay.

Mrs. Bracy took a small house in Heathercombe,—the very one that Miss Stafford lived and died in ; and thither the greater part of the furniture was removed. The rest was to be sold.

Mr. Banks, as executor, resolved to place the children under the care of a respectable woman at Fordbridge, hoping to be able to bring them each up in time to some respectable occupation. They had fallen into just hands, and Grace's mind was greatly relieved at the notion of her uncle having to settle for them.

While Cecilia was at Cross Farm, she liked taking walks in the neighbourhood with one or more of the children, as companion and protector. Grace's foot was not yet equal to a walk beyond the orchard. Sometimes Cecilia did not return as she went out ; she brought a companion, and he would apologise for coming in to rest, or to have some tea. It was Harry Vane who so often happened to meet her in her

various walks, and he made himself too agreeable for Mrs. Bracy to be anything but very gracious.

Often he lingered on quite late, walking about the garden, listening to Mrs. Bracy's regrets and sorrows, or talking to Cecilia, till, all the day's work fairly done, Grace, tired out, would join them for a quiet stroll, leaning on Cecilia's arm ; or sometimes, having already stood too much, she could only sit on a bench, and then insisted on their not heeding her. She could watch them, and was too stupid to talk.

She learnt to look on now, without even an additional heart-throb, or any sudden rise and fall in her colour, when Harry walked by Cecilia's side ; how he gathered flowers either for her, or at her bidding, for her to bind up and arrange for Grace. These flowers were conscientiously placed in water, and served precisely as all other flowers, neither petted over much, nor neglected.

Sometimes, only seldom, though, they had a little singing. The pianoforte was to be sold ; it was still a good one. Grace regretted it as an old friend ; but she wasted no words on it, and only once said anything at all, when urging it as a reason for Cecilia to play and sing.

She never directly asked Harry to sing ; she could not. Yet she took herself to task for the cowardice, and hoped to accomplish it yet. But as Cecilia's taste was like Grace's, her old favourites were not forgotten.

Too much of this Grace felt she could not bear ; it upset that calm state she strove so hard to maintain. One evening, when he had been led on, first by Mrs. Bracy and then by Cecilia, to sing one after another, ending in a simple but exquisitely touching little "addio," Grace slipped out at the window, and was found missing when the supper was announced nearly an hour after.

She had gone to the orchard. Overcome beyond her power of restraint, fagged by a hard day's work at packing and turning out some old stores of her mother's, she had been glad of the seclusion, of the pre-occupation which made her not missed. They thought her still in the window, or perhaps they thought not at all about it. So she deemed, and for once rejoiced.

She cried as she liked, and for once used no self-restraint.

"I shall be the better for it afterwards," she said. "I am foolish and weak ; I can't bear so much or so well as others. But God does not

forbid tears—nature's relief—sometimes so great a solace. God sees me; He reads my heart; He knows that these tears are not sullen, or angry or even regretting that which is past—that which I gave up to please Him. He sees it is only my infirmity,—a last tribute to old times."

So she arose, relieved and lightened; and though she knew her eyes were red, and would be observed, she came back quietly, and took her place at table, just as they were all surprised at not finding her, and proposing a search in the garden.

"How long have you been there, Grace?" asked Cecilia, with a little reproach in her voice and look. "You are cold and chilled. When did you go?"

"Just after the 'addio,'" Grace said, meekly, and casting a deprecating glance at Cecilia. "I felt a wish to go to my old haunt,—a want to think over old times. It is the last. I shall not do so again. And don't look so at me," she whispered; and she was unusually cheerful for the rest of the evening.

Harry had learnt to shake hands with Grace now, since her father's death, and since he had visited at the house. To-night she fancied it

was a more hearty and friendly touch than usual, and she was glad.

"I should like to hear him say he had forgiven me. Perhaps my going away afforded them the opportunity they wished for; and they understand each other, and that caused his friendly pressure."

But there was nothing particular in Cecilia to justify this conclusion, and Grace had still to wait. She sometimes felt impatient, wishing to have it decided, and wondered why they delayed. Yet they had abundant opportunity. This visit of Cecilia's had been a gain to Harry, and over this Grace rejoiced.

But time sped on. Harry's allotted three months was nearly over; and he spoke of his business in town, and looked anxious. Then Cecilia left; and again Grace was alone in the dismantled house. They saw no more of Harry Vane, at which her stepmother looked offended; but Grace smiled, guessing where he was.

The last day came. Mrs. Bracy was already gone to her new home; cart-loads of furniture were being packed and sent off to her. Grace preferred remaining to the very last, till the sale was to begin. She had begged to have this her own way. The little girls had gone to their

uncle : all were gone save one maid-servant, the gardener, and Grace.

She wrote letters to each brother from the old home, telling and explaining everything, and begging for a corner in their hearts. This done, she sauntered about the place, visiting each spot, each seat, and saying good-bye to all. Soon she might be an inmate of the Home. She had resolved to accept the kind invitation, and go there as a visitor. It might end—and most probably would do so—in her remaining there entirely. She was free at last. She smiled rather sadly to remember how ardently she had desired this, and what arguments she had used to prove her desire right. A little tired, she sat on the garden bench, the same on which she had heard the approach of Judith. And hardly was she seated, before she heard another step. This time, hurried and loud, crunching the gravel and whisking it with a cane. A muttered exclamation—a stop—and then the steps came quickly to where she was.

“They said—I heard—I should find you here,” Harry Vane said.

He spoke loud and, as it seemed to her, ill at ease. She tried to make it easy by answering readily.

"Yes, here I am, holding on to the last. But I didn't know . . . I fancied you were gone to London."

"I ought to be. I go there to-morrow. My time is all but gone." And he came to a dead stop, and looked quite perplexed and restless. He stood first on one leg, then on the other ; shuffled his hat, and unrolled and rolled up his gloves.

"Will you sit here, or shall we go in ? There is only an empty room, and this is the best spot I think. Have you seen—have you been to the Banks lately?"

"This morning. I slept there last night. They are very hospitable," he laughed a little.

"She is a lovely, sweet girl," Grace said, half absently, and yet partly with a wish to break the ice for him ; for that he came to tell her of his engagement she had no doubt.

"Who, Miss Cecilia ? Yes, she is a very interesting person. It is quite a treat to see such. She is a great friend of your's, she tells me. It is new to me, you know ; for before I left, you hardly knew there was such a family."

"Yes, one of the blessings of late years. A great comfort to me. She must be happy, she is so good. She will make every one happy she is with."

"Indeed I think so. I hope so—and—and—" he hesitated—then went on abruptly—"I dare say she will soon have the opportunity of proving her power. She may not long be Miss Banks."

"No," Grace answered very low.

A pause followed, broken by Grace's saying, "I shall see her to-morrow. I go to Fordbridge to-morrow—I must not stay here; they say I am invited to stay at the Sister's Home. Have you heard of it at all?"

"Yes," he answered drily; "we walked by it one evening."

"It is a sweet situation, and has a beautiful garden. A very happy home for lonely people."

She tried hard to speak cheerfully, but felt she had failed. Her voice fell in spite of her.

"And do you mean to make that your home?"

He turned round as he spoke and struck the ground with his cane in a nervous, fidgety way.

"I think so. It will be a comfortable one. It is not a new thought either."

"So I understand. And you expect to be happy there—you call it home?"

"Why not? what have I to expect or find half so good? Besides, I like the life and the

work, and always wished for it—only—circumstances were against me. And glad I am I did not rush into it, or what should I do now?"

She spoke as she felt,—earnestly.

"I suppose it is what you like—after your taste? You always were romantic—exalted I should say—and very religious." He sighed, then went on, "I suppose it is all right—I hope so! I am sure I do really hope you will find yourself right and happy; but it seems . . . Well, it is growing late. I am keeping you out here. After all," he said rapidly, and hesitating at each word,—"I came to say good-bye I believe. I doubted—but then I thought perhaps you would forgive me—overlook it, and though it is not very correct, and all that you see—"

"Indeed I should have been very sorry, if you had not come to say" . . . She cleared her throat and began again. "But I hoped, I fancied you came for something else. I began to fancy lately—only lately—you were not quite so angry perhaps—that—that—you might tell —me—about yourself and . . ."

Impossible to utter another syllable, a choking, stifling sob, resolutely subdued, and ending in a gasp. A pain too sharp to bear quite

quietly about her heart. She felt as if she must leave him ; but with great command over herself, she managed to remain perfectly still, breathing hard, but that was all. He was quite still too, and silent. She even looked at him. The clear twilight and moonshine showed his face, grave and troubled ; not at all the face of a happy lover. It was dark and uncertain, full of suppressed agitation.

“ Harry ! ” she said, her voice shaking and quivering ; “ we have known each other long—I believe—I think we must always remember it and be glad about one another. If you can forgive me—let me hear of your prospects ! Tell me all ! I shall be glad ; indeed I shall. If I think of you as happily married—it will—it will be a load gone off my mind—make me happier in my new home, you know.”

“ Thank you ; I understand. When I can oblige you in this respect—please you, I mean—I will do so. It is not settled yet, though.”

“ Indeed ! not yet ? ”

“ No,” he said almost fiercely.

She felt frightened, and hoped she had not blundered and done mischief.

After a little time he said, “ I had something to say—that is I thought—I wished—but some-

how I don't think you can understand me—you so misjudge me."

His face was flushed, and his voice had a grieved sad tone.

"Grace! you think me very bad; for you consider me a trifler now; your words and thoughts of me show it. But I wished to say—to tell you—how I had thought and felt since—since that day. But for you, under the good God, what should I have been now? I wished . . . I didn't know for certain about your plan of this Home," he said, in a different voice. "I heard of it from Cecilia, to be sure; but she hoped it would not really be." He paused. "Of course gentlemen are not admitted—at least such as I am—so—so—I had better say good-bye to you now—at once—only . . . Is money of any use there? for the Home I mean—I mean—would they take it from me—if—they knew all? Or—would you, could you be so good as to put it in your name?" and he pushed a parcel into her hand. "I don't think I've any right to offer it; but it would be a blessing—a comfort—"

"Yes, yes," interrupted Grace: "I will give it through Mr. Grant."

"I say it now, because I shan't have time,"

he went on : " I shall only run down to see my old father."

" Nothing else ? "

" Nothing else ? What else have I to do here ? I don't know, I am sure."

" In plain words, are you not going to be married and carry her—take her to Australia with you now ? "

" Not that I know of : it seems not. I go as I came, seemingly. Why surely, with your views—your opinions—of me—you would hardly approve of any one trusting herself to me, or my name ! I saw it directly in your eye—your very turn of the head. ' He thinks himself reformed,' you thought ; ' why he is only lucky. He has had no proof, no trial.' You scorned me (and quite right too !) in your heart ! "

" O, Harty, how can you say so ! how could you think so ! How very angry you must be !" and the tears, long kept back, burst out now. She leant her head on her hands, and shook from head to foot.

He sat down at the edge of the seat. He leant his head also on his hands, and his elbows on his knees. His fair hair fell over his brow heavily. He looked straight on the ground before him, angry, sorry, troubled and afraid.

"Well, don't fret about me: I shall be all right again. You have chosem your place; no doubt 'tis best so. You will be happy, happy as you deserve. It is all what I deserve too, every bit! You think me gay, and light, and careless; but I have suffered too, though not so much as I deserve. But what have I done? Brute, fool, to come here to set you off so, after all your work and trouble! Stop! do stop, Grace! It kills me! I'll go: I seem born to be your bane! I am going; good-bye! only—Grace, won't you pray for me, that I may be kept up? God saved me from my own sinful threats, and I liked to think it was owing to your prayers! God bless you! God love you, Grace!" He got up and took a step, then returned and took her hand. "Grace, Grace! for God's sake try me! Can you? Oh, were we not once solemnly pledged? I don't say much for myself; I know you scorn me still; but I am not what I was! I wish to be good! 'Tis 'No!' I see. Well then" and he moved off again. "If you would but try me! I think my very love for you would help to make you happy! You I have always loved, Grace!" he added tenderly, and more in his natural manner. Then he came up close to her,

and stooping put his arm round her neck, gently raising her face to look at it. "Grace, try me, try me! I couldn't get the courage to ask you —to even try to get at you, though Cecilia urged me to, many times. I shouldn't have come home so soon, but for old father. Too soon I fear for you to believe in me. But you think so badly of me! and what can I say? I can't prove it. Grace! Grace! is there no hope?"

She began to understand it all now. He loved her still: he wanted her to love him. She had ceased crying, and now she looked searchingly into his face. Very pale it was, and the moonlight made it more so. His arm gently drew her, and she yielded. Her head rested on his shoulder: he kissed her fondly, grasping her hand tightly and firmly.

"Have you forgiven me then?" she said.

"Forgiven you! Wern't they true words? And didn't they send me straight into another path? I was wounded, angry, perhaps; but it opened my eyes. I knew you, Grace; I knew you had loved me; I knew how good you were, without any nonsense, always good. It shocked me when it came to that. Not that I ever was quite what they made me out. But there was a foundation for their facts. It wasn't worth di-

viding false from true. I went away as if I was shot. God opened a path for me : things were made easy. But I won't boast : ask John ; or rather try and prove me yourself. Grace, if you will take me and trust me, you will see ! If not now, say a time ; I will try to bear it patiently as my punishment. In a year, or more if you like !" he sighed, and looked so sadly, yet so brave. " You will see !—I can't say more : promises are of no use. O, Grace, you do love and forgive me ; I see it in your dear face. I will never forget it : never, never forget this hour !" He pressed her to him again and again. Most earnest, most tender was his love.

She was still confused, frightened and yet very happy. They went in ; he said it was chilly for her. They sat in the empty, bare room ; one on a trunk, the other on a stool. The servant brought in a light, and said she would get some supper on the kitchen table if they would please to excuse it. And then while she prepared the meal, they went over the past, explaining their misunderstandings and fears. Harry had returned with the secret hope, which vanished almost into nothing as he came to England ; and when he first saw her—her fixed, rigid, set look, that day at Fordbridge, he felt

he knew his fate. She had pleasure now in telling him what she had felt that very day, and again at the pic-nic. He had let her go, feeling that she disliked his touch; while she, poor girl, was trembling all over, and almost ready to say, "Harry, I love you still!" She told him how soon the notion had risen about Cecilia, and he in return said he had been desperately jealous of every body, till Cecilia, like a true-hearted, frank girl, encouraged him to speak out about Grace. He went to seek her to hear all about Grace and her trials at home. He heard of the scheme of going to the Home, and dreaded lest her inclination should lead her to go there, and that she even considered it a duty to which she had bound herself.

"I soon however saw that Mrs. Marks wanted you for a Sister, and Cecilia as wife for that young brother of hers, whose return home she is always speaking of, and whom she praises up so much. What, you are surprised! Did you never guess this? Fancy your blindness!"

"I was so sure it was you always, I thought you must take to her."

"No indeed! I always have been faithful to you, for years and years. You know how I always loved you and admired you; and when

I heard of you as bearing so much, so quietly and uncomplaining—poor little meek, patient soul!—I could have, many a time, caught you up and sworn to thrash any one who looked even cross at you! It went to my heart to see you look so patient and smile. I knew you liked my singing; you always did; so I sang when I was asked. I knew you heard, though upstairs, that night when you cried; I knew it was the song which overset you, but I didn't think it showed any care for me. I believed you were sorry, and pitied me as a lost and unworthy wretch, and so wept over me and old times."

There was no end to his confessions. He talked on and she listened, seldom speaking herself; she had so little to say—nothing, but to repeat the same words. "I always loved you. I believed only too readily in your doing better. But I never dared, never allowed myself to hope you would think of me, or even forgive me. It is too much—too happy—I can't make it out."

It was late before they parted; and the next day he was to drive her himself to Fordbridge. He agreed she might spend a few days if she liked at the Home, while he was forced to be

in London. But after that she was to be at her Aunt Cissy's. Aunt Cissy had given her consent to him, and wished him well on his errand, and hoped Grace would receive him. Though she was to go away so far, she was sure Grace would be really happy as his wife. "What do you say to that, madam?" Harry's spirits were all come back again, and somehow, he made the parting from the old home not a very sorrowful affair after all. He had so many kind and loving things to say, and such a funny way of saying them too, that before she knew what she was about, she was driving down the narrow lane.

They made a long round of it; Harry enjoying the scenery of his old home that day. He asked if she could be ready to sail with him in a month. He would give up his passage by the ship sailing in a fortnight, and would take cabins in the one advertised for a month and a few days. Quick work, but an outfit was easily got if one knew how to set about it. He had some experience, and had picked up some hints from his Australian friends.

Grace made no objections or difficulties, but said she must consult her friends first. In her aunt's room, amid a buzz of voices, exclaiming

and settling and arranging, she said, "Do as you like;" "Settle it as you please;" "I am ready;" and she looked both ready and content. To see her soft eyes rest on Harry, who with his impetuous eager way returned now, made them all laugh, was to feel that she trusted him. Her aunt, who was taking quiet observations, saw the look, and so did Cecilia. Harry too, chanced to turn in the very middle of some important thing he was settling off hand, with the managing head, namely, Aunt Cissy, his eyes met hers, and directly his own became soft and dim. He stooped down, speaking low, as if to a tender child, appealing to her to vote with him; but Aunt Sarah observed, that afterwards, Harry's voice took a quieter tone. All his winning qualities took her mother's heart. She loved him for his great reverent tenderness, expressed in every look and word. A glance at Grace subdued his vehemence or checked a hasty word, though she did not even mean it or observe it in him.

They would not let her go to the Home that day. They kept all together, and let her go on the morrow, after seeing Harry off for London in the coach.

The next day during their walk, Grace en-

lightened her friends Mr. Grant and Mrs. Marks, as to the cause of her happy looks. The surprise was too great for poor Mrs. Marks to quite hide it. Such a disappointment as it was, to find it was not owing to the prospect of finding work and a home in her favourite spot. "O, Grace! Well, well! I thought you would do something more—better than that. Ah!—yet, my dear, I do hope you will be happy. I hope you have chosen wisely. After all, marriage is of course a divine ordinance; yet there must be some for whom such blessed Homes and such work is intended."

"They are for those," said Mr. Grant, who had previously, during his sister's harangue, pressed Grace's hand in token of his good wishes; "They are for those who have eyes and courage to see and to do the work whatever it may be, which lies directly before them. To such—to many among them, this work is afterwards given. Not those who merely seize upon it as a new idea, and spend on it that enthusiasm and energy which is roused by excitement, but fails for ordinary purposes, at least not without strict self-examination and proving. There will be found enough, when once the necessity of it is received into hearts,

for this work and life, without ever infringing on other duties. All those who have its promotion at heart, should be earnest in keeping the balance poised. We shall do great damage to the cause, if we allow it to take an undue place. There are many, many ways of serving God. Besides Grace was engaged once.

"Yes," murmured Grace softly, "they also serve who only stand and wait."

CHAPTER XXI.

GRACE had only been two days in the quiet Home. Very strange it had seemed to her, finding herself among them, hearing their cheerful conversation, and seeing the quantity of work they did so quietly and so simply. To her great surprise Harry returned from Town, and at once walked to the Home. No, he owned his business was not done. He had only seen the cabins he thought would do, and must write to secure them. Besides, why should he be miserable in London all alone? A week would do all he had to do, and they might

go there together at the last. He was so earnest in his pleading, and brought forward so many good and pleasant reasons to support him, that Grace could only agree, and making her excuses to the good Sisters, she shortened her visit, only promising to come back and wish them good-bye. Harry carried her off in triumph, and they made a long round of it, strolling and lingering about in the fields.

"One thing, Grace, I want to say, only I am such a rattle-pate, and can never find words," Harry observed. "But never blame yourself for the part you took. If only women had that sort of courage oftener, they might do a great deal to save fellows from reckless ruin. I knew so well the pain it was to you: that it was solely because you hated sin and loved the good. It struck me in a new way. Not at the very moment but afterwards. If it is so very bad that a loving, faithful good girl will break her own heart to have nothing to do with it, it must be a serious thing; it must be real sin. If you had hung on, remonstrating and lecturing, and so on, I should probably have gone on in a half-and-half sort of way, putting it all down to pluck and spirit, and a harmless kind of thing

which women and old people were bound to scold at. I believe I should have gone on from bad to worse. Your decided act was like a sudden shot. It brought me to my senses, and after the first excitement and anger passed off, I opened my eyes, and I respected you ten times more, even though I believed all was done between us, and that you would never look at me again. I kept you in my heart. By degrees I began to think, as I lived better, 'Grace would like this; she would be pleased.'—So you see, you were quite right."

"I have doubted it much, Harry; I have suffered great pain, fearing your threats."

"But you don't suffer now? You will like going to Australia?"

"I don't mind where I go with you."

* * * * *

"Why can't people go to Church and get married quietly any day without such a fuss and preparation?" Harry asked, when Aunt Cissy demurred at the early day he named.

"I suppose you wish Grace to be dressed as a bride for one thing; and you will like to see your friends at breakfast for another?"

"I don't care in the least what dress she

wears ; and don't we breakfast every day ? Put it all together and that will do. As to fuss and speeches, I shall be inclined to run away if you try that game."

So a very quiet breakfast, at which only relations came, was ordered ; and Harry had his way as to the day. The time slipped away only too fast. Grace drove with Harry one day to Heathercombe. She was to see Mr. Vane, her step-mother, and Miss Lee. The last visit was amusing. Poor Miss Patty could not, even to please Harry, hide a little anger and disdain, nor a good deal of satisfaction and triumph. But she came round before they left, and brought out her wedding gift, which was a handsome but old-fashioned tea service in silver. Harry said it would tempt the Bushrangers, but Grace admired and thanked for both.

And now there remains little more to be said. Grace had her troubles and trials. She would have them still no doubt. But in her new life, in a strange land she was loved as she loved. They found John already married, and settled near their own place. Robert did well after many reverses and wandering over the earth. In after years he returned and settled down as a wealthy man at Heathercombe. With him his three

younger sisters found a home, for he never married.

Mrs. Bracy lived to be an old woman in Miss Stafford's house ; but she never took Miss Stafford's place. Of Judith nothing was heard for years. At last a notice, cut out of a newspaper, was sent by some person unknown, to Mrs. Vane in Australia. It was an account of a miserable suicide, committed by a woman, in whose pocket were found papers which led the authorities to believe her name was Judith Bracy. They also discovered the clue to the Vanes' direction.

One great happiness was granted to Grace. She with her husband, and some of the Banks family attended Service, and received the Holy Communion at the Home, the very day before they left for London. Perhaps that was the happiest moment of her life, for Harry then offered his gift at the altar—a sum sufficient to cover the expense of the new wing they so much wished to build, which was to be devoted to penitents. Harry's manner, and his few simple words to Mr. Grant, hoping it might be permitted him to offer this as a thank-offering on occasion of his marriage, and as a slight outward token of his own penitence, sent Grace

to her own chamber on her return home, to thank GOD with a full heart.

“ Be strong in faith, bid anxious thoughts lie still ;
Seek for the good and cherish it—the ill
Oppose, or bear with a submissive will.”

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